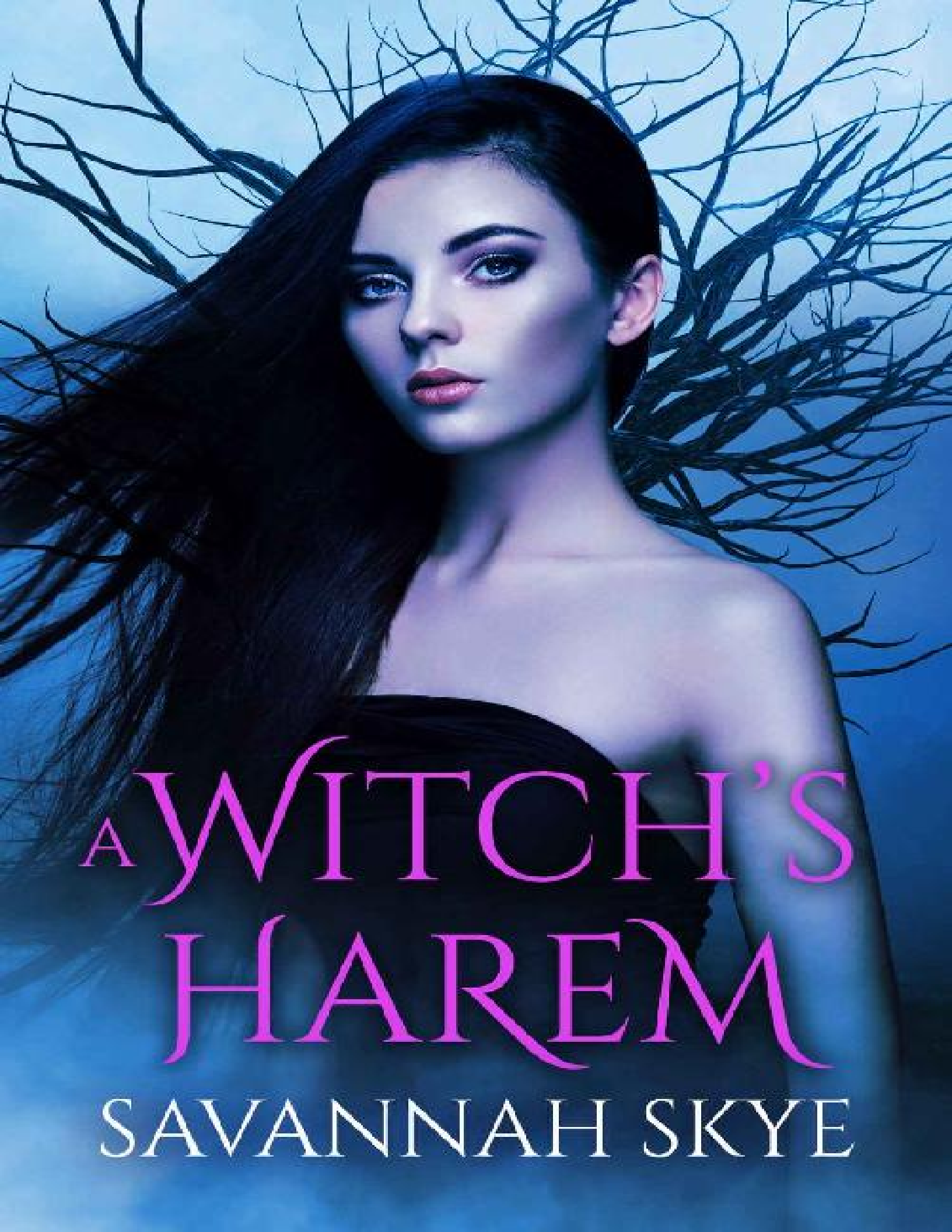
A WITCH'S HAREM
SAVANNAH SKYE

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A WITCH'S HAREM

REVERSE HAREM FANTASY

SAVANNAH SKYE

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INTRODUCTION

Sadie Matheson is a bad witch. Not like a cool bad witch, who kicks ass and takes names while being evil in the process. But like a crummy, stinky, inept witch who will never live up to the Matheson family name or the greatness of her mother or grandmother. When another great spell goes awry and she turns her dachshund into a parrot who still thinks he's a dog, she decides maybe it's better to leave Salem and give up witching altogether…until the O'Sullivan boys come along and turn her life upside down.

An ancient prophecy? Check.

Four, sexy warlock heroes with giant…egos and even bigger hearts? Check.

A book you won't want to put down? Ohhh yeah…

CHAPTER 1

"Cinnamon and taro root. Yes," I said to myself. "Wait…no." I paused, self-doubt creeping in.

Stop it, Sadie. Just think, for crying out loud.

"Yes. At least I'm pretty sure…" With a sigh, I stooped over the open book on my workroom table. Both ingredients were indeed on the list, yet a lingering sense of doubt remained.

And so, I checked it three more times.

Once I was perfectly certain, I dragged over a stepladder to the tidy shelves along the back wall. Hundreds of glass jars gleamed in the merry firelight. Each one a different size, shape and color, they were all affixed with a gold label in my curly handwriting. It was a satisfying sight. Everything in its place. Smiling, I easily located the taro next to the tansy and tarragon.

Clambering back down, I lined up the taro with the rest of the ingredients. Then I checked the book again. As I did so, I idly spun my fingers across the table's glossy surface, tracing the tree knots and whorls underneath the lacquer. You could almost feel the soul of the old Scotch pine in this wood. Perhaps I loved this table more than any sane witch should, but it had been one of my first big purchases for my shop's workroom.

How I still savored those two words. *My shop.*

The workroom, of course, was a proper one for a witch. On the wall opposite the shelves was a great tree branch, from which all manner of glass bobbles hung. Some were small planetariums, others held candles or keys or marbles. Curving along the top was a great chain of everlasting flowers,

a shop-warming present from an indulgent aunt, which continued up and around the ceiling. Here, stars and moons hung off silver wire, along with twisted stalks of plants.

Below, candles spluttered in the center of the table, more for ambiance, as there were several floor lamps throwing warm light across the room. Two windows peered east, out onto an empty street corner, where nothing but lonely leaves blew by the roots of a slumbering oak. In between these windows was a small fireplace, where a cauldron hung, bubbling at the ready for me.

Since the table took up most of the room, there was no other large furniture except for a cushioned rocking chair in the corner by the mantle and an end table heaped with books. Around and under the table was a palace of pillows for Samwise.

Samwise, my sweet dog, who was trotting after me with his signature waddle as I retrieved the cinnamon. Big brown eyes watched as I climbed up to get that top-shelf jar, which was nearly empty. Most of it had gone to a delicious apple-spice cider recipe earlier in the month, but thankfully I only needed a teaspoon for today's concoction. Sam's tail thumped the floor and he let out a mournful snort as I wobbled on the climb down.

"I'm all right, darling," I said, reaching down to scratch his ears as I passed. I didn't know what I'd do without him sometimes.

Referring to the book once more, I was relieved to see all I needed now were mermaid scales and owl feathers. Glancing around the workroom, I recalled my personal inventory had run out and I'd have to dip into the shop's.

Charming as my workroom was, it had nothing on my pride and joy, my shop.

A squat arched front door, with a mullioned window set like a round eye, peered out onto the narrow side street. Painted a rich green, it had a big and round gold doorknob sunk into the middle of it. (I'd always thought *Hobbit* fans would appreciate that.) Two bay windows flanked the door, the glass spotless, inveigling passers-by to peer in at what was offered in *The Witch's Keep*.

If one was curious, open-minded and had a love for the fantastical, that was plenty. On the right side, there were several round tables, with artful arrangements of mystical objects. Everything from crystals to crystal balls to charms. Beyond, bookshelves lined the walls. Wrapping around to the

counter, they were stuffed with everything from stories to spell books to practical magic guides.

Dreamcatchers, moon talismans and paper chandeliers made up of different creatures hung in front of two round windows. The creatures were everything from butterflies to phoenixes to dragons to cats. I was sure once people got wind of them, they'd be a hit.

Meanwhile, on the left, were a series of old-fashioned, leaf-patterned screens. Set around a table draped in a lovely, deep and shimmery violet material, it was stitched over with hundreds of moons and constellations from skies of far-off lands. It was a kind of heirloom, only I was the only one who'd wanted it when Great-Gam had passed away.

Here, at this table, if a customer were so inclined – I could peer at the lines of their palm and discern their fortune. Hint at adventures. Forewarn danger. Maybe see great love stories unfold.

Looking at the table, my eyes drifted to the old-fashioned pumpkin clock by the door and I stifled a sigh. Half-hour to five and not one single customer today.

Guess even with the touch of magic in the air, Ordinaries weren't so inclined to stop by.

Moving to the front window, I peered out and studied the street. Empty of people, as usual, the cobblestones were covered in a thick pile of dusty amber leaves. To the west, if I craned my neck, I could see a strip of sunset sky above the old church.

This time, I let myself sigh.

By Grimilda's chin. It was Halloween in Salem, Massachusetts. This strange, seaside town full of dark history for magic folk, and at the same time, a new age for them. Those murderous, close-minded fools of the 1600's would turn over in their graves if they saw what it was today.

Salem, a free-spirited, open-minded community, and supernatural stomping ground.

Only a few streets over, the sidewalks would be packed with tourists and locals alike, all seeking out a slice of the arcane. Honestly, I'd thought today, of all days, I'd have a few curious souls who'd wander down here. Didn't people come here for adventure?

Damn Boston real estate prices – this was as close to downtown as I could afford.

No, I told myself, *you know you would have bought this little place regardless.*

Shaking my head, I seized up what I needed and hurried back to the workroom. Dashing around, checking the book every other step, I began to add things to the cauldron. Soon, I was stirring feverishly and humming *This is Halloween* under my breath.

As I was about to add the last two ingredients, a sound from out front caused my entire body to seize with excitement.

The jingle of bells over the door.

Not unlike coins in a pocket or the chimes of a Fairy wedding, it promised a good Halloween at last. Pushing my sweaty hair out of my face, I wiped my hands and flew out to the front.

Behind the counter, I stopped short and repressed a groan with difficulty.

Standing in my shop was not a customer, but the last person I wanted to see.

"Mother, hello," I said, trying to smile even though it hurt my cheeks. "What brings you–?"

"Are these *Goblin* baubles?" my mother demanded, ignoring me. Her nostrils flared as she picked up a small metal trinket. "Honestly, Sadie, you're peddling the playthings of the Netherfolk?"

I winced. Pem Lanslieg, a Goblin metal and glassworker, had persuaded me to take it. I couldn't say no to her, she was like four thousand years old and her family was legendary. Apparently, some grandfather of Pem's had bitten off the ear of a famous prince and a distant cousin may have been Rumpelstiltskin. Held in my mother's manicured hand, however, the Lanslieg star looked like battered tin. Most beautiful things, unfortunately, looked woebegone in Delia Matheson's presence.

Wearing a black dress from the Chanel Fall line, my mother was tall, elegant and beautiful. No fat would ever be found on her perfect frame, no sir. Green eyes snapped at me and she shook back her hair, a glorious red wave falling to her waist.

Every inch a Matheson witch.

Meanwhile, I barely came up to my mother's shoulder and attempted to hide my curves in ankle-length skirts and flowy peasant shirts. This morning, too, I'd thought I didn't look half bad.

But as Delia's scornful eyes swept me from head to toe, every stitch became crooked, common and pitiful. I was no longer a young witch with a flair for the bohemian and adorable dimples.

No, I was nothing but a frumpy, frizzy mess of a disappointing daughter and a woeful witch.

Standing there under Delia's upturned nose, I wished I'd thought to wear something different. Or at the very least, black. My shoulders slumped and Samwise instantly came galloping out from the workroom. Spotting my mother, the dachshund's back humped up and he growled, showing his tiny, sharp teeth.

"Endor's shade, give me patience," my mother muttered, flicking a finger at Samwise. He whimpered as a muzzle dragged his head to the floor.

Immediately, I flew over and bent down to take it off, biting my tongue the whole time.

"A dog as a familiar," my mother said, rolling her cat-like eyes to the ceiling. "A dog. I mean, Sadie, child – if you wanted something *exotic* – get a screech owl or a lynx. A witch should have something elegant, not a wiener dog, for crying out loud."

In response, I patted Samwise's head and nudged him to go into the back.

As I straightened up, my mother huffed and asked, "Are you going to come to the coven meeting tonight? It is Halloween, dear. Or did you forget?"

"I did not forget," I mumbled, twisting my fingers. "But I'm not going."

Guilt pooled in my stomach, but I couldn't take a night of Matheson witches swooping down on me and demanding a play-by-play of every last spell performed.

"Circe's cup!" my mother exclaimed, then she groaned. "Are you trying to kill me? You really need to stop with all of this nonsense – experimenting and selling foolish glimpses of magic to Ordinaries." Her lips twisted. "You *need* to let me train you to be a proper witch instead of running this silly little shop. Since when does a witch need to *work* for money?"

I blew out a breath and tried not to roll my eyes. I should have known better and headed Delia off. Oh, I was in for it now. Worse, I should have known *this* was coming.

"As witches," my mother said, her voice deepening and the shadows leaping up. "We take what we want. Such is the way of an apex creature in

the universe. Ordinaries are just that – ordinary. They aren't to be treated as equals, you little fool. Nor are they to be entertained by *us*."

"Mother," I said gently and the shadows melted back to the corners. "This is my life. You cannot come in here and try to bully me into following your path. How many times do we have to have this argument…?" I stopped myself before I apologized and willed her to understand.

An irritable sigh escaped my mother, but she desisted. "At least close early and come to dinner." Her green eyes were flat. "It's not like you have any customers…"

"No, thank you," I said firmly, ignoring the sting of her words. "You go and have a lovely evening. Tell the coven I say hello and no offense meant, but I'm quite busy. In fact, I have a spell I'm finishing up right now. So, I bid you farewell, mother."

Giving up, my mother swept to the door in a swirl of black and red. With a curt farewell nod, she exited, slammed the door and vanished up the street.

Back in the workroom, I tried to shake off the encounter. First, I checked the potion's list again. But I kept rereading the same part of the page. Trying to pull my mind back to the task, I grabbed the scale, then the feathers, and tossed them in the cauldron. With an elegant twist of my hands, I snapped my wrists and spread my fingers. A puff of smoke wheezed out and I frowned.

Glancing around, an inkling of dismay hit me. Nothing had happened.

"You've got to be kidding me," I muttered.

Deeper and more ominous silence.

"I did everything right," I yelled into the cauldron.

Suddenly, the bells jangled again and I wondered if my mother had brought reinforcements. I could not deal with my grandmother or cousins tonight. Especially after yet another failed potion. Hurrying out front, I smiled in relief when I saw it was my best friend Belinda.

"Cheerio, love," she said, affecting a British accent and flipping her dark hair back from her face. "Have I got some delectable news for you."

"Hi, Bells," I said, coming out and hugging my pixie-like friend. She was all dark blue tones and impish smiles, but thankfully, as good a witch-friend as you could ask for.

"Sadie Matheson, listen to this." She grabbed my forearms. "There is a *massive* and totally *secret* Halloween party going on *tonight*!" Belinda

loved her italics and exclamation points. “It’s at that old Haulhead House, you know, the mansion right at the edge of town…” She paused for dramatic effect. “The haunted one.”

“Haulhead, huh?” I asked, trying to think if I knew any ghosts who hung out there.

“Yes,” Belinda crooned. “Word is, some rich guy rented it out, decorated the place and it’s going to be so *brilliant*! Costumes, free drinks and free food. Should be a bloody blast.”

“Oh,” I said, gently freeing myself from Belinda. “I’m not sure I want to go… I’m not really into parties, you know that.” *Plus, I have to figure out what went wrong with that spell and there are a million other things to go do…* And I had more excuses where those came from.

Belinda’s face fell and she glanced around the shop as though to find something to convince me. Her eyebrow shot up. “Oh hey, when did you get a parrot?”

“Huh?” I asked, turning and following her gaze. A bright blue and purple parrot was perched on an old coatrack. As we stared at it, the parrot let out a bark.

Oh no, no… My jaw dropped. *Samwise, no…*

I’d turned my beloved dog into a parrot. One that *barked*. Pinching the bridge of my nose, I suppressed the urge to scream or make myself disappear. Although, come to think of it, I’d probably turn myself into a troll if I tried it.

“Ooh…” Belinda said, wincing as she caught on. “Well, Sades, it could happen to anyone.”

No, I thought. *It would only happen to me.* The Matheson muddle of a magician.

Samwise let out a whimper and shuffled his feathers as Belinda went to look at him more closely. Watching them, I then glanced around my otherwise empty store.

I started as it hit me. I’d been trying this for over a year now with little success.

My life was going nowhere.

No customers. Failed experiments. Dog was a parrot. Mean mother. Annoyed coven.

Heart sinking, I wondered if it was time to close it all up. Throw it in as a bad job. More than that, maybe it was time to throw away my “rulebook”,

as it clearly hadn’t been working for me.

It had to be that thought that prompted my next statement.

“I’ll go,” I heard myself say. My voice was robust and sure for once.

Belinda whirled, clapping her hands. “Oh, girl, we’re gonna have fun tonight.”

Silently, I vowed to do just that. To step out of my shell. It was Halloween night. If anyone should have a good time, it was a Matheson witch. Even if I was the family screw-up.

Then, tomorrow, I was going to take a good and hard look at my life. Perhaps I was destined for the fate of an Ordinary, far away from Salem and the weight of the Matheson witches’ name.

Sometimes the truth hurt…

CHAPTER 2

I'll put a spell on you… And now you're mineee!

Bette Midler's voice crowed through the room as Belinda danced over to me, waving a long, filmy green scarf. She tied it around my hair and fluffed out my curls. I submitted to her fussing without protest, even as I tried to flatten down the skirt of this silly costume, which kept riding higher due to the amount of taffeta under it. But then, grabbing her purse, Belinda whipped out a sparkly pink makeup case and I was hard put not to wince.

Pulling out the liquid eyeliner and wielding it expertly, Belinda commented, "One would almost think you didn't want to get dolled up." I gave her a sheepish smile and she shook her head. "Relax, Sadie. You're gorgeous. A little makeup, along with that smoking costume and short skirt… Sure to cast the most dangerous of all spells tonight…"

I pulled on the skirt to no avail. "What, frostbite? Legs falling off?"

"No, *feminine* magic. Womanly wiles. Va-va vixen!" Belinda sang out. "God, I wish I had your eyes. Emerald green and a little cat-like. You're a wicca knockout, girl."

She pulled out red lipstick now and I couldn't help but feel a kick of energy in my veins. It was impossible to mope with Belinda around. And no one could have a good time or encourage it like her. No matter what, the evening would be memorable.

Better yet, I wouldn't have to spend it with the coven.

Laughing and joking with Belinda now, I helped her finish up my makeup and then we stood together in front of the mirror.

Belinda, with her long legs and short hair, played the perfect part as a dangerous, harlequin vampire victim. She'd even artfully decorated puncture wounds on her neck.

I, on the other hand, was in a far too flattering gypsy costume. While it fit and flaunted my curves, it also showed way too much cleavage and leg. A fluffy dark skirt swirled around my waist, barely covering my panties. It was pretty, covered in color-shifting sequins, where each step caused it to shift from black to green and back again. A gold braided belt was slung low on my hips and my boobs were squashed up by a teal corset, tied with the same gold cord. Fluffy white cap sleeves slipped down my arms and my hair was set off perfectly by the scarf.

As Belinda grinned at me, wiggling her eyebrows, I forced a smile back.

Inside, however, I was all but melting with mortification like the Wicked Witch of the West.

I look ridiculous. This is not meant for a plump person. Oh god, all the people of Salem will point and laugh…

Before I could convince Belinda to let me wear something, anything else, she'd seized my arm and we were outside as though she'd teleported us there. The wind was rustling down the street as the sky overhead was navy blue. Pale wisps of clouds, like wayward spirits, streaked across the sky, chivvying us along to the party. There was a smell of wood smoke, burning leaves, and apples in the air. And if you inhaled deeply enough, you could catch a faint whiff of the sea.

A perfect Halloween night in New England.

Turning a corner, I let out a soft "*oh*."

Rising in the East, dappling the harbor with a burnt golden path, was a fat full moon. Stars peppered the sky around it, glinting and glimmering with a vengeance.

The cobblestone streets, lit up with the orange glow of old-fashioned streetlights, became more crowded as we went along. Running footsteps echoed down to us. Kids were darting up to houses, screeching "*trick or treat!*" Behind them, groups of parents gossiped and laughed.

A tingle of excitement went through me. The mood for mischief was contagious and suddenly I liked this costume. Energies of the night, *this* magical All Hallows' Eve, flowed through me. I was hard put to keep from trailing my hand through the air and letting off some sparks.

Thumbs pricking, I wondered if I was in for a magical time. But magic made me think of my shop, the failed potion, and with a sharp pang of guilt, Samwise's new look.

Belinda shot me a sideways glance as we turned down another street, a long line of trees blocking our destination. There was a graveyard on the left, shutting out the busy town.

"What's with the face, Sades?" she demanded.

"Poor Samwise – he's still a parrot." I chewed my cheek. "I should have turned him back. That wasn't very fair of me to go off and party while he's got feathers."

"Oh bloody hell, we can fix that first thing tomorrow – we'll go out hunting for oxtails at Pickering Point. Besides, Samwise seemed fine. It's good for him to have a little adventure."

Nodding, I smiled and forced myself to put it from my mind.

Silently I vowed again, *I will have fun tonight.*

Belinda let out a whoop and startled birds took off from an old pine tree, streaking across the sky. *Maybe not as much fun as Belinda though*.

The music greeted us first, the bass pumping through the air as we twisted and turned up the long drive to the Haulhead House. Multicolored lights, slipping through the shadows, came next, beckoning us on like will-o'-the-wisps. And finally, the shouts of glee and drunken mirth.

People had already overflowed onto the wide lawns of the mansion. Craning my head, I saw a dark, many-turreted house stretching against the sky, the top windows lit with electric candles and the bottom windows filled with dancing shadows.

Fighting our way inside, Belinda grabbed my hand and used her flashing smile to get us to the front of the bar in thirty seconds flat.

What followed was a whirlwind of drinking, games and drinking games. Some involving shots, one of which I won and made me wonder how exactly I'd won. Then there were pinball machines, pin the tail on the werewolf, poker and so forth. We joined in on a few, Belinda easily charming the crowd, while I cheered her on. After that, we danced for a bit, with several guys making moves towards Bells, who brushed them off and stuck with me.

"You don't have to do that, Bells," I whispered to her. "Go dance with them."

“You’re a better partner!” she shouted, whipping her head back and forth. “Besides, none of them were cute enough.”

“How could you tell?” I asked, puzzled. “They were wearing masks.”

“That’s how I could tell,” Belinda shrieked and I laughed.

Catching our breath back by the bar, I was sipping on a water and letting some of my tipsiness recede. Another guy came up, trying to interest Belinda, but she sent him packing in short order. Man, she was brutal tonight.

“Belinda,” I chided. “He was very polite.”

“Mmm, he was a wanker,” she said and her eyes lit up. Nodding behind me, she whispered, “Now, that’s what I’m talking about. Doesn’t even need a mask or a costume to turn heads.”

“Huh?” I asked, turning and coming face-to-face with a tight sweater over a broad expanse of muscled chest. “Oh, h-hello, there,” I stammered out, stumbling back and gaping up at him.

Woah.

He was seriously hot and for some mysterious reason, he’d stopped right in front of me. Suddenly, his hand landed directly on the wall over my head as he moved closer. Now I had to almost lean back to look up at him. My insides were a vortex of mammoth butterflies, beating their wings so hard I thought I would throw up.

And then, he *smiled.*

At me.

“Hey, ladies. Mick O’Sullivan. You having an alright time?” he asked, glancing at Belinda before his piercing light green eyes landed on me again. The perfect color green, like a sprig of grass in May. Add that to his rolling Irish brogue, broad shoulders and bulging biceps, I was about to hit the floor.

“Not too bad,” Belinda said, elbowing me. “Glad I could get *Sadie* here to come.”

“What, you were gonna stand us up, love?” he asked and I found myself flushing. “Risk not meeting me?”

“Nah, she just likes to play hard to get,” Belinda said in an arch voice.

Again, he smiled at me. This gorgeous chiseled brunette of tough guy had a smile that melted me like wax. *Batwings and broomsticks, am I dreaming?* I wondered, unable to look away.

Belinda was right, too. Mick wasn't wearing a costume and girls were giving him long, covetous glances anyways. Instead, he was wearing a faded pair of jeans that fit his perfect, sculpted Tom Brady ass like a dream and a turtleneck sweater that brought out his eyes.

I smiled back, cheeks heating and scooted back a bit so that my ass hit the wall. That jolt seemed to wake me up. Clearly Mick was here to get Belinda. Being nice to me was part of his ploy.

Belinda was introducing us properly, Belinda Watchkin and Sadie Matheson. I tried not to listen after that, wishing I could actually melt into the wall. Something about having Mick hit on Belinda while I stood here between them filled my stomach with ice chips.

Mick let out a deep chuckle at something she said and I glanced down at the floor.

"What's your poison tonight?" I heard him ask.

Elbowing Belinda when she didn't respond, I looked up at her and she made a face at me.

Hello, Bells! This Mick O'Sullivan is majorly hunky, why aren't you responding?

"Sadie," Mick sang in my ear and warm breath brushed my neck. I almost jumped out of my skin as I turned back to his hypnotic green eyes. "What, you don't wanna tell me?"

I glanced at Belinda, who was grinning and biting her knuckles. *Uh oh.*

Giggling, she gave me a quick wave. "I'll be back."

And then she was gone.

Traitor! I screamed in my head.

"So?" Mick asked.

My excitement for the evening was rapidly shriveling into dust. The butterflies were there, but now they were joined by terrible nerves.

What is this Mick up to? I wondered. *What's his angle?*

Out loud, I said, "It's nothing special. The house mix or something."

"Ah, we can do better than that, love," Mick said with a grin and he gestured with his head toward the bar. "Come on, Matheson."

Following his broad back through the crowd, I saw more than one dirty and disbelieving look come my way. My skin crinkled as an ominous feeling came over me. This was all starting to seem orchestrated. And not in a good way, like, by a kind Fairy of Fate, but in a Stephen King horror-story

kind of way. As in, I was Carrie and the bucket of pig's blood was incoming.

Clenching my fists, I stood woodenly by Mick's side as he ordered himself a beer and me a martini. After I got it, I said a quiet "thanks" and tried to sneak away.

But the bastard followed me.

Unable to lose him, I resigned myself to the worst. Somehow, we wound up in a less noisy corner, by a large window, and I saw the moon was almost at its peak. Right now, the coven would be outside, rejoicing in the night wind and the deepening hours of All Hallows' Eve.

"Penny for your thoughts," Mick said in a friendly voice.

Too friendly.

I shrugged. "Nice night. Full moon."

"Oh, yes," Mick said, sounding oddly formal for a second. "Erm, you live here in Salem?"

I gave him a flat look. "Yes."

Rubbing the back of his neck, Mick said, "You like it here? Even with the history?"

"Sure," I said.

Mick made a face like *geez, love, don't make it easy on a fella*, and I wanted to laugh.

That's right, bub. Just 'cause you're Mick O'Sullivan, and say that like it should mean something to me, doesn't mean I'm going to make it easy for you to humiliate me.

"You don't like your drink?" Mick asked, his eyes flicking down, then up. "I can get you another. You should've said something, Sadie, it's no problem."

"It's fine," I said crisply, sounding like Delia for a half a second.

"You've taken nary a sip," he said, his poise slipping for a second. There was a challenge in his green eyes, one I was surprised I wanted to meet. "C'mon, Sadie, what do *you* want?"

I took the smallest of sips.

"No worries, I'm good," I said quietly.

Mick got a stubborn set to his jaw and tried several other attempts at getting a conversation going. At one point, I almost gave in, but I steeled my heart. I wasn't going to get fooled by a tall, strapping Irish dreamboat. Even if he was kind of nice for all that brawn.

Not tonight, Satan.

Finally, though, it had been too long since I'd seen Belinda and that's what prompted me to cut to the chase. As Mick tried, in vain, to talk about sports, something I actually did enjoy far too much for a non-Ordinary, I'd had enough.

"Look, O'Sullivan, my dog is a parrot, my mom's a bitch on wheels and it's been a shitty day overall, so if you're going to murder me or play a trick on me, can you get it over with?"

CHAPTER 3

For a second, Mick looked astonished. Then a broad grin crinkled his eyes up and he let out a bark of laughter, leaning over as his shoulders shook with hilarity and he almost spilled his drink.

My lip curled and I tapped my foot, waiting. Here it was, the moment where all his friends would come out and laugh at me.

Cue the pig's blood.

Instead, what happened was far more shocking to my system.

Mick straightened up and reached out, playfully tugging on a loose tendril of hair. It sent a strange fissure of heat through me as his green eyes danced and he regarded me for a moment. That stupid, charming smile of his was back and I was starting to melt again.

"I knew you were going to be funny," he said, his voice slightly husky.

What? Flabbergasted, I tossed my hair back and crossed my arms. I was suddenly feeling wrong-footed and kind of like an asshole for stonewalling him.

With a shrug, I muttered, "The chubby ones always are, right?"

"Mmm, love, that's where we'd have to disagree. I see a *woman* here with the curves to slay dragons, never mind the likes of men. And you see, Sadie Matheson, there's a big difference." A lazy smile lifted the corners of his mouth and I hugged my arms tighter, biting my cheek. "*Quite* a difference." Mick ran his eyes over me and I went hot all over. "I can't help myself," he murmured. "Love those…" He raised his hands and mimed my curves. "Curves of yours."

From anyone else, it would be douchey. With Mick, it was bold, delicious and sexy.

Like him.

Our eyes met and I sucked in a hard breath at the flash of raw heat in that glance. Flustered, I bowed my head and noticed how close we were standing. Immediately, I looked back up. Another pulse of heat speared the air between us and Mick took a step closer.

At a loss for words, I offered him a sheepish smile.

Warmth was still spreading, now in waves across my chest and up my face. There was an insistent friction between my legs.

Mick seemed to know it, too. The smirk on his face said as much. Not only that, but the challenge was back in his eyes. Again, I had the strangest urge to meet it, but part of me was still holding back. Part of me was still whispering this was too good to be true.

But another part of me had woken up. And it was wondering if I could be so lucky...

“You gonna be nice to me now?” Mick teased. “C’mon, Sadie, I’m busting my balls here trying to get a smile on that pretty face. I wouldn’t do nothing to hurt you. Swear on my life.”

Unable to help myself, I smiled for real and Mick all but peacocked as he stood up straighter.

“This is really good,” I said shyly, taking another sip of my drink.

“Good. So, tell me, how come you’re a gypsy woman?” Mick asked. “Can you read my palm?”

"Sure," I said without thinking, and he held out a broad, large hand. Suddenly, I blinked, realizing I was mixing work, witchcraft, and play. As I drank.

Bad idea.

“What’s it say, love? Do I got a shot in hell with you or should I cut my losses?” Mick asked.

Unable to come up with a response, I panicked and lightly slapped his hand, as though high-fiving it. “No, I was only kidding. Belinda picked this outfit out… Um, I can’t tell you anything...”

Warm fingers latched around my wrist as I went to pull away. “Bet you could.”

Chest rising and falling too quickly, I tried not to slop my drink as I gently pried myself free. But I could still feel his fingers as I twisted them in my skirt. “Sorry to disappoint.”

Mick gave me an affectionate smile. “Aw, love, *never*.”

Another tingle shot through me and I was certain I had the stupidest grin on my face in return.

However, now that I wasn't trying to be a bitch, it was easy to talk to Mick. Soon, we were both laughing and even went to get more drinks. Then we laughed and talked some more.

Eventually, we wound up in a room where I was perched on the edge of a couch, Mick standing over me and the sound of music far away. There had been a few people in here when we first came in, but suddenly I realized, with a nervous jolt, everyone was gone.

At that moment, a tall figure loped into the room and stretched his arms overhead. Mick made a noise between a sigh and laugh. The man spotted us and a grin cracked his face.

"Oh, what's all this then?" he called out in a light, dancing brogue.

Another Irishman? I wondered and as he came closer, I started. *Another O'Sullivan?*

"My cousin, Patrick," Mick said and my lips parted as I took him in.

Patrick was ripped like Mick, but in a leaner and rangier way, like a bad-boy surfer. Dressed like a pirate, a crisp white shirt was open on a broad chest. Hastily looking up, warm chocolate eyes landed on mine and he flicked back his sandy blond hair.

As was the way of the O'Sullivans, it seemed, I couldn't breathe or think for several seconds.

What do they feed these boys in Ireland? I wondered in a daze.

"Gyspy mine, would you have me toss this briny fool to the sharks?" Patrick lilted. "Or would a marooning be more to your taste?" he asked, then he suddenly sank to his knees and put his hands to his heart. I chuckled and shook my head. In response, Patrick seized one of my hands in both of his. "Whatever you so desire, name it and it'll be yours."

"Get up, you fool, she didn't ask for a court jester," came a cool, deep brogue, like a wind off the sea. And again, I looked up and was temporarily speechless and struggling to think straight.

Another O'Sullivan had materialized out of nowhere. Something about the jaw or the set of his shoulders told me as much. Dressed in a black shirt and jeans, this man was taller and stood up straighter. He had serious, soulful eyes the color of a storm cloud and wavy brown hair shot with auburn, making me think of Michael Fassbender.

I bit my lip. *Wonder if he's like Mr. Fassbender in any other of impressive ways.*

"Yeah, Pat, she doesn't know you well enough to know you're not as mad as a hatter," Mick chimed in, waking me up to the fact I was ogling this third O'Sullivan.

To my surprise, Fassbender-O'Sullivan extended a hand.

"I'm called Seamus."

"Oh," I said, taking it and trying not to swoon as he bent down and kissed it. "Um, I'm… You didn't have to…" I was blabbering and fanned myself as Seamus let me go. "Sadie Matheson."

"I know," Seamus said, a warm smile flitting across his face.

"Don't be stealing my moves, mate!" Patrick grumped, pressing a kiss to the top of my hand and then the palm, making me jump at the feel of his bristled chin. "Sadie, it's a pleasure."

What is happening? I wondered in a daze as I looked between the O'Sullivan men, each one sexier than the last. But for very different reasons. Mick, with his loosely folded arms and cocky smirk, made me feel protected. Patrick, eyes full of laughter and a contagious smile, made my heart glow with a reckless kind of mirth. And Seamus, silent and strong, steadied something inside of me.

Dumfounded, I listened as the cousins began to debate what to do. Patrick of the opinion we should bob for apples and Mick wanted to play pool. They only stopped arguing when Seamus intervened and asked me what I wanted to do.

"Oh, um, I don't want to get my hair wet," I said, twisting my hands. "But I've never played pool… I could watch you guys, I guess."

Patrick reached out and seized my hands. "What? No! This must be amended at once. I'll teach you, lass. It's fun, I promise."

Which is how I found myself teamed up with Patrick, playing against Mick and Seamus. Both of them took the game a little too seriously, while Patrick was focused on having fun.

And lo and behold, we were winning.

I wasn't doing too badly, either, with Patrick's help. In between our first turn and theirs, he'd made me jump out of my skin when his big hands landed on my shoulders. Before I could pull away, though, his thumbs were performing miracles on the back of my neck. I'd had to bite back a mewl.

“You’re a natural, Sadie,” Patrick said cheerily. My shoulders went to hunch up, but Patrick kept them down. “A true ringer, for sure. I’m not saying that to butter you up, either. I mean it.”

Turning, I looked up at Patrick as Seamus took an expert hit. This close, I could see the amber flecks in his brown eyes and his smile became devilish. My heart fluttered.

“Got a feeling you’re a natural at a lot of things,” he said in a whisper.

Before I could disabuse him of that notion, Patrick stepped forward, letting me go and picking up the cue stick. Spinning it like a baton, he winked at me and took a wild shot, knocking several more balls in. Seamus and Mick both made annoyed noises as they were losing again.

The smug look on Patrick’s face made me laugh, though. His big hands and relaxed air helped me cut loose. For once, I wasn’t agonizing about making mistakes or how I looked. And he kept a constant stream of quips that had me in stitches, making jokes at Mick and Seamus’s expense.

Both of them tried not to laugh, too, but it was impossible.

It was nice to laugh like this, I thought as Patrick slung an arm around my waist and grinned down at me after I’d taken a particularly impressive shot. *I should do it more often.* In fact, I couldn’t remember the last time I’d had fun and laughed like I didn’t have a care in the world.

Several times, I glanced up and tried to spot Belinda in the crowds going by the room. I wanted to get her attention so she could see what was happening. She’d never believe me if I told her. I could hardly believe it and I was living it. And I was pretty sure that unless Belinda saw it, she’d think I’d gotten drunk and fell asleep into a pool of fevered dreams.

In fact, I pinched myself a couple of times to make sure I wasn’t dreaming.

Once Patrick and I won, there was a squabble about whose team *I* would be on. I glanced down at the drink that Seamus had gotten me and wondered what was in it.

“Let Sadie pick,” Seamus said in his deep, calming voice and I instantly flushed.

"Oh, I-uh, I don't mind," I said in a small voice, not wanting to hurt anyone's feelings. Then I blinked. Since when was I in a position to worry about hurting the feelings of three different men?

“Don’t put her on the spot like that,” Mick snapped, glaring at Seamus.

“Oh, don’t fight,” I said, feeling worse. “Um, what if we flip for it?”

To my surprise, Seamus pulled me to his side and hugged my shoulders. “Good idea. And we might argue, lass, but think nothing of it. Just cousins taking the piss out of each other. You know, teasing and fun? Although, if it bothers you, please speak up.”

I made a squeaking noise as I looked up at Seamus, trying to answer and understand. But all I could wonder in stupefaction was, *Wait, why do I get a say in that?*

“Here, mates,” Patrick said, pulling out a fat gold coin and spinning it on a finger.

“Pat, where did you get that?” Seamus demanded and Mick let out a snort.

“Nicked it off a leprechaun, of course,” Patrick said with a wink in my direction. “Call it.”

“Heads,” Mick said quickly.

“Tails,” Seamus called.

It was tails and Seamus’s hands were on my shoulders now as we went back to the other side of the table. He smelled so good I thought I would faint. Some expensive masculine cologne.

Where Patrick had smelled a bit spicy and Mick clean, Seamus had a woodsy, mysterious scent.

If I thought Patrick had stoked up the fire that Mick started, Seamus was ten times worse. He didn’t say much, but he took to silently correcting my hands, even sliding a leg between mine to fix my feet. And he was always right there, warm and sturdy.

Halfway through the game, I was smiling to myself as I watched Patrick and Mick goof off. They'd lost track of the game and were now wielding the pool cues as though they were swords. I'd never been much of a grown-up and it made me happy to see they were kids at heart. It made me feel less alone.

Suddenly, I realized, without meaning to, I’d leaned back against Seamus. More than that, I’d settled my body against him, my curves warmed by his hard torso and suddenly his strong arms were around my waist. At first, I went to pull away, but Seamus tightened his grip.

He wants me to stay like this, I thought in amazement. His breath tickled my neck and I broke out in goose bumps. Swallowing hard, I tried not to rub my thighs together.

“Are you having a fun time, Sadie?” he asked in his quiet, deferential way.

Turning, unsure where to put my hands, I rested them on his forearms as I looked up at him. “I am,” I said, then I saw Seamus looked concerned and my brain reeled in confusion. “Wait, are you?” I blurted it out because I couldn’t think of another reason for him to be concerned.

“Of course,” Seamus said. “I wanted to make sure we weren’t intruding on you.”

The way he said, *of course*, as though there could be no doubt, as though there was no other place he wanted to be standing, made my knees buckle slightly.

“You’re not bothering me at all,” I said positively. “You’re being so nice, I…” I was about to say something stupid and self-deprecating, but I stopped myself. “Thank you.”

Suddenly, Seamus pulled me in closer, his lips inches from my ears. “You’re welcome.”

When he let me go, I was dazzled inside and smiling ear to ear.

Finally, it was me and Mick. He’d apparently missed me, as he constantly found playful ways to tease me, tugging on my curls or resting his hand on my neck. Then, setting up one particularly difficult shot, he stood directly behind me, my ass in his crotch and body pressing into his. His hands slid down my arms and I was struggling not to pant.

More than that, I was trying not to act like a slut, but I honestly didn’t know which O’Sullivan I liked the most.

How could a girl choose? I later thought, when the three of them were standing together.

Either way, it was a problem for tomorrow. Shrugging it off, I lost myself in having fun and throwing back drinks. I’d had a nice buzz for a while now and I didn’t want it to stop.

I didn’t want this night to end.

After another couple of heated rounds, I was wondering if I was leading them on and wondered how I’d gotten myself into such a position.

Now, we were taking a break, with me sitting on the pool table, swinging my legs and chatting with the three of them. Everyone else was long gone.

I should leave, I thought ruefully. *This is a recipe for disaster.*

As soon as I thought it, a man walked into the room and I gripped the edge of the table.

“Michael!” Patrick called out to the newcomer. “There you are.”

“Was starting to get worried,” Seamus muttered.

“Everything good, cuz?” Mick asked.

Michael didn’t answer, merely shrugged. Taller than Seamus, he had deep blue eyes like a twilight sky and dark, inky black hair. There was a hard set to his jaw as he glanced around. And the look on his face was one of intensity, the kind that came with formidable intelligence.

All in all, he was one hell of a sexy, commanding O’Sullivan.

My mouth was watering and the heat between my legs had reached a fever pitch.

Yet Michael hadn’t uttered a word. I blinked, realizing the other three had fallen silent. We were all waiting for him to speak. It was as though he had sucked all of the life out of the room.

The leader of the pack, my mind suddenly whispered.

As though hearing my thoughts, Michael met my gaze and nodded slowly. A hungry smile played around his mouth and I was reduced to a quivering heap of nerves.

His voice was a melodic brogue when he finally spoke, with a note of triumph.

But what he asked didn’t make the least bit of sense.

“Has she agreed, then, boys?”

CHAPTER 4

"Agreed to what?" I asked, hopping down and turning to look at the others. Some instinct had woken up under my booze buzz. Anxiety bubbled in my gut as Michael strode forward. Shadows were rushing up, swallowing the light. "What is going on?" I asked, looking around in confusion.

Michael stood over me, face inscrutable. "No time to explain, these idiots should've done that already. We've got to go."

Before I could open my mouth, he'd flicked his wrists, swirling his hands and suddenly I was spinning like a top. A scream was stuck in my throat as color, light, and wind rushed by my face. It went on and on and I closed my eyes, throat aching.

Until I stumbled, gasping, and my knees hit a carpeted floor.

Scrabbling back, I saw I'd landed in front of a massive fireplace. Logs cracked and threw warmth across my face. Dazed, I stared at it for a good minute.

Then, slowly, I got to my feet and turned in a circle.

I was in a richly furnished room I'd never seen before. It was a cozy, lovely place, with exquisite furniture made of reclaimed wood and upholstered in emerald green. A grandfather clock ticked away in the corner, a starry night painted on its face and gold hands ticking away the minutes. Besides the clock and the snapping fire, however, the room was quiet.

Except for the tattoo of my heart pounding in my ears.

Shaking my head, I stared around the room again. Besides the handsome mantle, decorated with jars and sprigs of pine, there were

glassed-in bookshelves, a few armchairs, and a comfortable, wide couch, almost like a bed. Windows set on the opposite side, deep in the wood-paneled wall, showed nothing but dark forest. Okay, this was all very nice, but I was freaking the hell out.

"Hello?" I whispered. "Where am I?"

For a good minute, I stood there, waiting for someone to come in or for something to happen. But the clock kept ticking and the fire kept popping.

My heart was pounding more violently than ever.

Wondering if I was dreaming, I eyed the windows and saw my reflection with a start. I was still wearing that stupid outfit Belinda had dressed me in. Something inside of me snapped.

I've been kidnapped.

I swallowed a panicked scream.

I glanced around wildly and spotted a door between the bookshelves. I hadn't seen it before, almost as though it was trying to pretend it wasn't a door. Bewildered by that thought, I rushed over to it. As I yanked on the handle, it seemed to slip and slide under my fingers.

Snapping my fingers at it in rage, I saw a spark and leaped back. Then, with a huff, I tried to grab it again, but I knew it was no use. The handle would elude me as the door was shut with a spell.

I recalled Michael and the way he'd moved his hands. My stomach dropped even further.

As I stood there, I could feel the magic humming around me. Like the wind rising up before a storm, it was powerful and a bit dangerous. I stepped back and eyed the room again.

"Oh," I said, reaching in my bra for my phone.

Hastily, I unlocked it and dialed Belinda. But as I rose it up to my ear, I heard nothing. However, the hum of magic had intensified slightly, prickling along my skin.

Is anything in here not enchanted? I wondered, my pulse pounding.

Pressure throbbed in my throat as I thought back over the last few hours with the O'Sullivans. All of that had been a stupid prank. Eyes smarting, I wondered how I could have ever thought those handsome guys liked a girl like me.

I should have known it was all a trick.

Head drooping, eyes stinging, I tried to work out *why*.

Beyond pointlessly cruel, what could anyone hope to gain by kidnapping me? My head ached as I paced around the room. Their betrayal was a fresh, raw wound on my heart, hurting more than it should have. Every step seemed to intensify it.

Delia's face swam into my mind and I stopped short. Was this my mother trying to prove a point? Even though this kind of trickery seemed cruel even for her, hadn't I learned to put nothing past a Matheson witch? I wondered dully if it was some way to make me do Delia's bidding. Kidnapping me and locking me up to ensure I'd have nothing good in my life unless I listened.

I stashed my phone back into my bra with shaking fingers. As I did so, the lock screen lit up and I saw Samwise's sweet brown face looking up at me.

Poor dog, who would walk him tonight? Better yet, who would turn him from a parrot back into a dachshund?

The thought of Samwise, oddly, calmed me a bit. Walking over to the couch, I sat down and tried to take several deep breaths. The corset was constricting and so I lay flat, staring at the high ceiling, watching the dancing shadows cast by the fire and trying to *think*.

I was a witch, dammit. Enchanted room or not, I could get out of this.

Racking my brain for spells involving locked doors and hidden rooms, I had a few ideas. One voice inside me darkly said it wouldn't work.

Ignoring it, I got to my feet again and eyed that obstinate door. First, I threw a bolt of power at it. It hissed through the air and then made a terrible *plang* as it was knocked away.

Moving closer, I dug deeper and moved my hands in a slow circle over each other as I tried to unlock it. There was a sound like *shhhk* and the energy dissipated.

Again, and again I tried. But nothing worked. In my irritation, l let another bolt off and this time it almost ricocheted back at me.

Maybe the door wasn't the way to go, I tried to reassure myself.

So, I spun to the windows.

But after a failed glass-cracking spell, a windstorm that petered to nothing as it approached it and a dissolving spell that made the window frost over, I wanted to scream.

Frustrated, I threw out my hands at both the windows and door, unleashing all matter of hell. For a second, the magic rose in a fury and

sparks danced through the air.

I've got it, I thought triumphantly. *Heed me and unlock. Let me free!*

And then the couch burst into flame.

"Oh, come on," I said, watching the fire smolder in on itself within seconds and leave a massive scorch mark on the plush cushions. "Ugh, I hate Halloween. I hate everything."

But more than that, I hated the O'Sullivans, with a fresh surge of agony.

I would have preferred the pig's blood to this, I thought to myself bitterly.

Pacing around, twisting my hands in the frilly skirt, I wondered how I could have been conned so easily. A few nice words, a handful of empty gestures and I'd been eating out of their palms. Disgust and mortification threatened to choke me.

I kept going over and over what had happened in my head, each memory a new slap in the face. Mick's playful teasing, Patrick's jokes, and Seamus's kind words.

Michael's sexy smile.

Hugging myself, I wanted nothing more than to be home, in my own bed, safe and sound.

I wished I'd never gone out. I wished I wasn't such a joke of a witch.

A particularly loud crack from the fire made me jump and I turned around. Suddenly, with a burst of dizzying embarrassment, I saw that there was a door next to the mantle. It blended in well with the wall, lost in shadows. But I could see a sliver of deeper black and I hurried forward, I realized it was open. Pushing in, I flicked on the light.

It was an old-fashioned, rather ornate bathroom with an ocean motif. A huge porcelain clawed tub stood in the corner and fluffy blue towels were stacked on a shelf.

More than that though, there was a window in here.

An open window.

I'd never been so happy to see a curtain fluttering in a breeze before.

Ripping it open, I saw that it was a slim window coming to a point at the top. The two panes opened outwards, wind whistling through the crack. It blasted me as I pushed them open and saw that there was a sturdy tree branch right outside. Practically waiting for me.

Stepping gingerly on the toilet, I hoisted myself through, boobs scratching painfully on the gray stones framing the window. Undeterred, I

wiggled forward and my hands seized hold of the branch. I pulled myself forward inch by inch towards freedom.

Until I came to a sudden stop.

At first, I thought someone had caught hold of me and I twisted backward, neck protesting the movement. A gasp escaped me as the culprit became all too clear.

My goddamn bodacious hips.

No way. I refused to be imprisoned because I was too chubby to escape.

Gritting my teeth, I gripped the branch harder, the wood splintering my skin. Pulling with all my might, I scraped another millimeter out. Then I began to twist and try to wriggle free.

But all this accomplished was rucking the costume around so that more of my cleavage spilled out. Try as I might, I only seemed to get myself more firmly imprisoned.

Humiliation was a bitter and ugly pill to swallow. Plumpness had done me in again.

Now I was stuck. I couldn't move forward or backward.

To add to the disaster, the wind was picking up and I shivered as it hit my skin. Plus, I was at an awkward angle. Hanging out the window, my legs dangled in the bathroom uselessly and I began to lose feeling in them. Defeated, I let my head fall, a groan escaping me.

Then I froze. Over the wind, there had been a rich chuckle.

I wasn't alone. As though ascertaining that, a broad hand landed on my back.

I thought things couldn't possibly get more humiliating. But this Halloween night seemed determined to prove me wrong, as I sank into previously unheard depths.

My cheeks and eyes grew hot. Feeling utterly exposed, as though both trapped and naked, I wondered if I might throw up or pass out. Maybe die.

Let me just fall out of this window and end it all, I begged the universe.

Then came *his* voice. Deep, sexy and amused.

"You having a spot of trouble, love?"

CHAPTER 5

Chin trembling, I had no voice with which to answer.

All I could do was cover my face with my hands as whatever O'Sullivan behind me magicked the window wide enough to drag me back in.

His big hands were warm on my hips as he set me on my feet. I was still staring at my palms.

Why couldn't I be an adept enough palm reader to see this shit coming? I wondered.

I heard him closing the window and I chanced a peek over my fingers.

It was Michael. There was laughter in his blue eyes and I hid mine.

"My apologies for making you wait, Sadie," he said, sounding genuinely sorry. "I had some things to take care of and it took longer than I anticipated."

Unnerved, I looked back up as he waited for me to respond. However, my tongue was currently stuck to the roof of my mouth. So, instead, I looked away and tried to subtly fix the stupid gypsy costume. But like the window, it seemed to prefer me being stuck where I was.

Into the silence, Michael said, "Mm… Alright, come along, then."

A large hand clasped around my upper arm and pulled me back to the warmth of the fire. Once he'd let me go, I was starting to get pissed. How dare he try to be all sweet and nice to me?

The O'Sullivans had kidnapped me. I was the victim here, and this guy was one of the villains.

"What the hell is going on?" I demanded, hands on my hips.

Michael’s lips twitched in something that looked suspiciously like a smile. “You’re lovely when you’re mad. But why don’t you sit down and I’ll go get my cousins,” he suggested. “Then we can all discuss the matter at hand.”

Wincing, I glanced at the couch as I remembered the failed spell. Too late, I saw Michael had seen the scorch mark, too. Fighting back a smile, he flicked his fingers and it was repaired.

Walking over, he sat, resting his hands on his knees and looking at me expectantly.

Huffing, I followed and sat down slightly away from him, hands clamped on my elbows.

“Do you want something to drink?” he asked politely.

“No,” I snapped. “I want to know why you kidnapped me!”

A faint line appeared on Michael's forehead and he looked forbidding for a second. I drew back and his expression cleared, a flicker of concern in his eyes.

“Don’t be afraid, lass. We’d never hurt you,” Michael said in a voice that was almost a growl.

“I’m not afraid,” I said in a steely voice, surprising myself. “I’m angry. Big difference.”

Michael’s face was impassive and he was silent for several moments before he said, “We, the O’Sullivan four, were sent from the Ring of Kerry to seek out the most powerful witch in Salem.”

I stared at him, nonplussed. So what did he want, my address book? A lot of fuss for a name…

I rolled my eyes. “How nice for you,” I responded stiffly. “Try the Yellow Pages.”

Michael simply smiled. That knee-bobbing, heartrending and sexy smile.

“Sadie,” Michael said, in a slow, deliberate way, “all signs point to *you*.”

“Me?” I asked, something rising in my throat.

“Yes, you, Sadie Matheson, are the most powerful witch in Salem.”

Laughter erupted from my lips as all of the emotions rioting inside me broke free. Falling back on the cavernous couch, peal after peal escaped me and echoed through the room. It took me several minutes to get my breath

back. And though I was still chuckling, I propped myself on my elbows and looked up at Michael.

His brow had furrowed again and his face was thunderous. My laughter died instantly.

He was *serious*.

Dead freaking serious.

Hastily, I sat up, pushing my hair out of my face and trying to break it gently. “Oh, um, you’re mistaken...” I paused. “Sorry. You’re probably after my mother, Delia. Or my Grandmom.” I shivered slightly. “Freya Matheson?”

Michael shook his head solemnly. “No. It’s you, Sadie Matheson.”

This time my name was a slap in the face. Like I needed people outside my family and coven mocking me for being a two-bit witch. *Stupid, smarmy O’Sullivans.*

“Enough!” I was on my feet before I realized it and breathing hard. Glaring at Michael, not caring that he was the sexiest man alive, with his beautiful blue eyes, dark hair and deep brogue, I shouted, “I am done. Done! I have to go – I need to feed my dog-parrot." Tears were pressing into my eyes and my throat was a grating ball of anguish. "For a joke – this was beyond cruel. You stupid O'Sullivans didn’t have to pretend to like me and go through all *this*.”

I was becoming incoherent and the tears were threatening to escape.

With that, I stormed to the door and tried to wrench the handle open.

“Let me out,” I said in a quiet, deadly voice.

Michael had gotten up and I sensed his presence like a building thunderstorm.

“No,” he growled. “Sadie, you need to listen–”

Glaring at the wood, willing the tears back, I spat out, “This is the lowest and pettiest bullying in the world. Keeping me here and these stupid stories – making me think you all *liked me*.” I was shaking now. “What did I ever do to you?”

“*Sadie*.”

A small, shaky breath blew between my lips. No one had ever said my name like that. With such force and tenderness. Almost against my will, I turned around and faced him.

Michael’s eyes were two pools of electric blue fire. He was prowling towards me and heat flared in my belly. I held up my hands as though to

push him away, but he grabbed my wrists and locked them against the door. Hard male edges were pressing into me and I looked up.

Lips crashed onto mine and my mind went blank after a single *oh.*

Michael pushed me harder against the door as his lips became more insistent. Dominating and demanding, like him. For a brief second, I fought back, but it was like fighting a tidal wave. More than that, I wanted this. I wanted to give in. I wanted him.

Eagerly, I dove into those depths. Our hands slid together, fingers interlocking tightly and Michael pulled them over my head. Completely at his mercy, a gasp escaped me at how much I liked it. He didn't waste that opportunity, his tongue stroking mine and my spine bowed, pressing me further into him. A desperate ache was between my legs, again, and I was unable to do a thing to satiate it.

Instinct ruled as sensation after sensation built. Overtaking every last inch of my body.

It was getting worse with each caress. There was a molten pool of desire in my belly. Michael wanted it there. He stoked it into a frenzy. My skin was flushed and every cell was tingling.

Abruptly, he let go of my hands and I missed their loss, but only for a moment. I forgot as soon as his fingers were in my hair, tugging on it and tilting my head back. Michael was tasting every inch of my mouth and I trembled against him, looping my arms around his neck. When he leaned down, pulling me up toward him, gripping my waist – my fingers made their way up into his hair. I stroked the silky strands and used them to hold him closer.

A growl escaped him and I shuddered. Michael's muscular thigh pressed the aching spot between my legs and I bucked against him, gasping at this pleasure curling up from my core.

The grandfather clock chimed, startling me from the sensual spell he'd woven around me without using magic at all. I released him with a gasp and jerked back. Slowly, he pulled back, sliding his leg away as I met his blue eyes. There was a new intensity there and a glow filled my chest.

He wanted more. He wanted *me*.

As though to drive home that point, Michael pressed his forehead into mine and grabbed my hand. Everything inside of me went supernova as he pressed it against the massive bulge in his pants. Growling in my ear, he demanded, "Tell me, does this feel like I was *faking?*"

With that, Michael let me go, after one last searing kiss. And I was reeling as he dragged me back to the couch and sat me down. I couldn't help but glance at his crotch.

That was a raging erection. Nope, definitely not faking.

Blue lightning seemed to flash at me as I looked up. Michael was standing over me, arms folded, and he demanded, "Will you listen *now*? Please, Sadie."

I tried to say yes, but all I could do was nod. At that moment, I realized I was a bit of a mess, with more of my cleavage out than in, curls wrecked and swollen lips. So was Michael, with his tousled hair and rumpled shirt. Our gazes lingered on each other for a moment and I realized I was smiling.

Never before had I felt so sexy. His cologne had rubbed off on me and I sniffed the air happily. Then, I stretched out, waiting with a lazy, indulgent kind of patience for what would happen next.

Michael had hesitated and was watching me. He swallowed and then seemed to force himself to go to the door. Ripping it open, he barked something out into the hallway and a second later, I heard footsteps. Seamus, Mick, and Patrick strode in, Mick eating a sandwich, Patrick playing with a yo-yo and Seamus stowing a book into his back pocket. The last O'Sullivan looked mildly concerned until he saw me, while Mick and Patrick greeted me with enthusiasm.

My heart softened as I saw there was no deceit in any of their faces. This was a strange circumstance to be sure, but I was no longer afraid, despite the fact that I should be.

I heard the door close and we looked up to see Michael re-enter. I hadn't realized he'd left, but once again his presence took over the room.

"Come here," he said curtly, sitting down in one fluid motion in front of the fire.

Pulling me to my feet, Mick steered me and sat me down directly in front of Michael. He sat to my left, while Seamus arranged himself on my right and Patrick completed the circle.

Eyes flicking around to each of them, a powerful and strange emotion filled my chest.

"Hold out your palm, Sadie," Michael ordered quietly.

Curious, I obeyed without question. One by one, each of the O'Sullivans then reached out, their hands also palm up as they supported

mine. In a way, it almost looked like a star. Mick was first and Michael was last.

As he touched my hand, I almost cried out in a shock as sparks leaped from my fingertips.

“Only when all of us are touching hands can we behold the prophecy,” Michael said.

“The…the prophecy?” I croaked, trying to think clearly with them all touching me at once. This was clearly important to them and despite the fact that I knew Michael was mistaken, I didn’t want to ruin whatever it was he was trying to share with me.

I managed to keep it together and suddenly, the sparks began to coalesce into a bright, golden fire, spinning madly through the air and bumping into each other like drunken stars. Lips parted, I watched in shock as it slowed and spun itself into a square. No, it was a book – a book flickering to life from the flames.

It turned five times before it fell open onto the first page to reveal an image etched there.

A witch. One fierce, powerful and laughing witch. Her red hair was alive in the wind, tossing against a night sky and her green eyes glowed like emeralds.

More than that, I recognized her.

“That’s…is that me?” I gasped.

I already knew the answer to that question, though. It was. A less chubby, way more confident and badass version, maybe. But it was definitely me.

Holy shit…

CHAPTER 6

"This is one of the *Libris Ides*," said Michael in a reverent voice as I met his eyes through the whirls of sparks. "Books of good magic, written in the tongue of fire by witches of light. This particular one records a vision seen over four hundred years ago. For you, Sadie."

"Wha-how?" I spluttered, yanking my hand back.

It did not break the spell, although the sparks died down. The rest of the boys pulled back and Michael gestured at the fiery book, causing it to flip forward a few pages. Clasping my hands together, I watched as the symbols and Latin rearranged themselves into English.

Patrick began to read it aloud, shoulders hunched and his hands balled into fists. All the humor was gone from his face and anger flickered in his eyes. "Yule Day, four hundred and thirteen years hence, the Purging begins when the fell warlock awakes."

"Purging?" I asked. The word was poison on my tongue and my blood ran cold. "A purging of what?" And why did I have a feeling I didn't want to know the answer?

"Not what, but *who*," said Seamus softly, and his fingers brushed my shoulder in reassurance. "Go ahead, Pat."

Patrick continued, reading on, "Rowland Skinner, of the Rathbone Coven. Patient, cunning and determined, on this Yule, he will see his purpose met. Mortals, manipulated by the dark mage, will carry out atrocities against the Hidden World. Trials and Hunts will commence, the likes of which have never been seen. Folk of magic will suffer endless persecutions. And none but Skinner's own shall walk free." His blond head

fell. “As they glut their appetite for power, they will destroy the balance between good and evil. Darkness will reign evermore as good magic dies…”

“This is a prophecy?” I asked, rubbing my temples. “What’s that got to do with–?”

I stopped as Seamus lightly touched my shoulder again. He now read the words aloud, the fire turning his eyes silver. “Lest the Darkest of Warlocks is undone by the Brightest of Hearts, the Daughter of Wicca and Light, hear me now, the Purging will come to pass.

“She alone can stop the rising darkness leading to endless night. She alone can bring together the four elements and aspects of magic. She alone will save the Hidden World.

“She alone can save us all…”

I couldn’t speak. *This is all part of their joke… This can’t be… This isn’t happening…*

"Beware Skinner's black gifts," Mick spoke now. He wasn’t even reading the book, but staring at the floor. “He will not strike at the powerful, but lurk in the shadows, sowing fear, distrust and the most dangerous of ugly passions. All sins that lurk in the human heart will run amok as he wakes and walks unseen. Hysteria will overtake good sense. The mortal race will turn upon all magic, unaware they are doing Skinner’s silent bidding. His hands will hold the world and every last babe, child, woman, and man who stands against his wicked heart – from those with a touch of Sight to the greatest of Practitioners – will be extinguished.”

“*Extinguished*?” I repeated in a horrified whisper.

Michael gazed at me as he picked up where Mick left off. “This is how Skinner will raise a new order of magic. One aligned to the darkest of practices to fulfill his dark purpose. The Purging will lead to a Dark Age, where evil runs riot and demons will feast on mortal flesh for millennia.

“Hear me, only a White Witch in the New World can stop this.

“The Good Witch of Salem. An unlikely choice mayhap, but one of pure heart and spirit.” Michael’s voice was fierce. “She is the only chance for the salvation of the ancient gifts, our children, and our world. Only she can stop Rowland Skinner. Only she can thwart the Purging.

“Only the brightest heart can burn out the endless night.”

The book bobbed in the air, pages ruffling as though in a high wind and then it fell to the ground with a *thwump*. There, it rematerialized, becoming

a bound black book with a pentagram stitched onto its cover. Michael reached out and picked it up, then twisted his hand and it vanished.

Wait! I wanted to cry out. *That can't be all, there must be more. This cannot mean…*

Me.

"We'll begin come dawn," Michael said, standing up, and his cousins followed.

My eyes darted around before I slapped down my palms and pushed myself to my feet. "What the hell was that?" I demanded, hands on my hips as I glared at the boys. Now that the fireworks were over, I was starting to get a grip on myself. Belinda always said I was way too gullible.

Witches hunting witches? A purging of magic? Me, somehow involved?

They looked surprised and glanced at each other, then Seamus said, "This is the Prophecy of the Lady Oralee, Seer of the Ring of Kerry. One of our line, lass." He tried to smile. "As her descendants, it was our duty and honor to find you."

"Find me? To-to-what? Stop the end of the world as we know it?" I let out a hiss of air. "Hilarious. Okay, you've had your fun."

"It's no joke," Mick said, frowning a little.

I couldn't get my thoughts or questions together. That word, *Purging*, kept spinning through my head and making my stomach churn. And all of them were looking at me expectantly, yet they weren't answering my questions or letting me go.

Finally, Patrick spoke up. "Rowland Skinner and Lady Oralee may have been separated by an ocean, but she knew rightly what that bastard would get up to. You heard it yourself. 'Tis this Yule, Sadie. December twenty-first. Shortest day and longest night. And if we do not stop him, an endless one at that." He drew a hand over his face. "If only we found you sooner…"

"None of this makes any sense," I said through gritted teeth. Then something hit me. "Rowland Skinner," I murmured. "Wait! There's a statue of him in Winter Island Park…" I clawed into my memory for his history. "People leave coins at the base. He lived here four hundred years ago, yeah, but he wasn't a dark mage." Anger snapped in my chest. "He was a rich merchant who denounced the Witch Trials – one of the few who did so and lived."

"You know of Skinner?" Seamus asked, surprised.

"And there's a bloody statue of him?" Patrick's lip curled with disgust.

“Rowland Skinner,” Michael said in a tight voice, “was a practitioner of the darkest of magic. Yes, he bore witness to the Salem Witch Trials and spoke out against them, but secretly he plotted against the mortals as well. He hated that the Ordinaries feared us and yet he stoked it as well. Some even say he let loose a demon on the town, which emboldened the likes of Cotton Mather, Samuel Parris, and others to hunt our kind. In the end, instead of peace, he sought war.”

“I think you’re wrong…” I said slowly.

The O’Sullivan cousins made noises of disbelief. Mick folded his arms, shoulders swelling like he wanted to go out and tear down that statue with his bare hands. In a clipped voice, he said, “Sadie, please listen. Skinner called together the Covens of New England during those years and tried to convince them to fight against the mortals. To wreak havoc and spill their blood. While not all the poor souls who hung were witches, a few were.” He paused and shook his head. “His speaking out was not for the benefit of our kind, though, but to whet his dark appetite. War and fear make dark mages stronger. Plus, Skinner took it as a sign of what was to come anyway. More persecution. So, when the covens, save his, spoke out *against* taking revenge, he was incensed.”

“Rowland Skinner was not some dark mage,” I insisted, growing more skeptical of this story and tired of their trickery. “We can go look at his statue right now.”

“Skinner played along and agreed when the other covens talked him down,” Michael said, pretending like he didn’t hear me, although a muscle jumped in his jaw. “They had opted for peace, having faith that Salem would one day be as it is now. A haven,”

“Exactly, so it didn’t work, even if he was…” I was tying myself into knots. This was all impossible, but at the same time, I was getting this dreadful feeling in my gut.

“You’re not listening,” Michael snapped. “It was all pretense. The Rathbone Coven and Skinner took it upon themselves to decide who should be able to wield the ancient gifts. He was patient. He knew it would take time. So, he gave his coven secret instructions – to spread his word and purpose. Find others and swell the ranks of their clan. To grow their magic and his.”

“No, he’s dead. In fact, I think his grave is in the Old Burying Point Cemetery,” I said.

“That grave holds no corpse. Skinner sleeps now, somewhere…” Seamus let out a frustrated sigh. “He found a way to slow his heart so that years pass between each beat. When he wakes, it will be as though mere days have passed. But Skinner’s confidence is such that he expects to waken to a Dark Yule, one where he will see his dark purpose done. So, when he awakens to a world where magic is still hidden and now mingles with the Ordinaries in a haven like Salem… Well.”

“Sadie, he will make good on his promise and begin the Purging.” Seamus was looking at me with a kind of pity. “Stirring the fear and mistrust of the Hidden World. It will be a witch-hunting frenzy, one to purge all magic – dark and light – who dare go against Skinner. And once we’re gone, he will control the race of magic and ensure it is in his image. You heard Oralee’s words. He will hold the world in his hands and the Ordinaries, his puppets, will be offered up as a feast for every evil thing that lurks in the night.”

“The Purging has to be stopped,” Michael said, sounding frustrated. “As the year dies, it will begin.” Now his tone became biting. “Unless the Good Witch of Salem *wakes* up to her destiny.”

There was a moment of silence, where all that could be heard was the whisper of wind through the trees and the snap of the burning logs. As I tried to comprehend what they were saying, my brain rejected it, yet my heart began to beat faster and faster.

“Sadie, it’s you,” Michael said with a flash of blue eyes, and the air crackled around him. “Everything points to you. What, you think we would waste our breath telling you all of this and scaring you if not? What proof do you need? There is the picture. Oh, and the fact that *she* would come of age on the eve of the new millennium. You turned five in the year 2000, correct?”

“You’re basing this on my birthday?” I asked, a nervous laugh escaping me. I’d forced myself to ignore that nagging jolt in the back of my head. “Wow. My mother did put you up to this.”

“There’s more than that, Sadie,” Patrick said, his tone far sweeter and more wheedling than Michael’s impatient one. “Your powers–”

“Powers, yeah, hm. If this is all true, you have the wrong witch.”

“An unlikely choice but our only chance,” Mick said, stepping forward, and I stumbled back. “But one of pure heart and spirit.” He paused. “It could only be you.”

Shaking from head to toe, I marched towards the open door, head held high, even as a voice whispered at the back of my head to stay. “I’m done. Bye, boys,” I said in a choked voice. “This was an entertaining Halloween, I’ll give you that.”

The door slammed shut as I approached it and a rush of cool energy went through the room.

“Not this again,” I sighed and whirled around. “Let me go.”

“You can leave when I say…” Michael started, then he swallowed something and said in a far smoother, patient voice, “When *we* are done talking." Behind me, I heard the door lock and I rolled my eyes. “If you need proof, lass, *fine*. We’ll give you proof. And if you still do not believe us when we’re finished, then you can leave.”

We stared at each other and the air crackled with tension again. For a moment, I almost couldn’t believe that Michael had kissed me. It must have been part of the ruse to get me to stay. Which meant there was probably some grand finale coming.

I was about to tell him where he could stick his prophecy when Seamus spoke.

“Please sit, Sadie,” he said, stepping closer and blocking Michael’s icy glare. “I promise you’ll understand in time.” He glanced at his older cousin. “It is *a lot* to take in.”

Shrugging, Michael turned to the fire and laid his forearm on the mantle.

Walking over to the couch, I plopped on it ungraciously and Seamus drew up a chair, while Mick and Patrick sat on either side of me. All of them were trying to smile and failing miserably. It sent a strange jolt of nerves through my stomach.

Suddenly, I realized too, their demeanor and way of speaking had changed subtly. It was more polished, less jovial and had an air of the old-world about it. Not to mention each of them looked gravely serious.

I wished they would stop already.

“You don’t want to believe it,” Patrick said softly and I jumped, staring at him. “Neither did I, lass. Not exactly a nice bedtime story, eh?”

Looking down, I saw my hands were shaking and my heart began to race. The coldest of horrors began to envelop me, like serpents and iron bands looping around my skin.

Chest rising and falling, I tried to reject it, but instead, I began to do the opposite. I was thinking back over this last year and all the strange days it had brought.

Hadn't Treysi Belaba, my friend and a Peruvian *curandera* woman, mentioned several times about how she kept seeing dark portents, yet couldn't find the source? With several other witches and mages adding they had as well?

Hadn't there been an extra chime by the village clock on each of the three Friday the Thirteenths? Never mind the three Friday the Thirteenths in one year…

And hadn't my own grandmom complained her thumbs wouldn't stop pricking?

Sometimes, poor witch that even I was, I'd felt something on the air.

How many times had I glanced over my shoulder to find nothing was there? Or had a cold wind whispered across my neck? Inexplicably sweeping down the narrow streets, with a hint of sulfur and smoke on warm and cold days alike. The agitated cries of birds? The reports of less cod in the bay than usual? And sightings of animals migrating sooner than usual…

Strange and dark dreams all around Salem, a town holding its breath in anticipation…

"Even if it is true," I said slowly, "I couldn't possibly be the one you're meant to find. I'm not some sort of *savior*." I put my hands on my cold cheeks. "You have to find the real witch, I mean, not that I'm not a real witch, although my mother could tell you some days she doubts it. What I'm trying to say is, I'm no good at it. Magic. I mean, earlier today I was fooling around with a spell, okay? I had been working on it for most of the day and I don't know how, but I turned my dog into a parrot. He's still stuck like that, too. And, oh yeah, I have a wiener dog as a familiar, talk about not your average witch… I'm… I'm sorry." I put my head in my hands.

Mick's fingers tangled in my hair and a spark of heat leaped in my belly. He tugged on my hair gently and I looked up at him.

"Sadie, lass, that's what we're here for." His green eyes were filled with both affection and pride. "To watch over you. Protect you." He poked my chin. "And teach you."

"Are you sure, though?" I asked in a hushed voice. "I mean, the birthday, and okay, the picture…"

“You’re also the nicest witch in Salem, Sadie,” Patrick said now and he grinned at me as I gave him an incredulous look. “No one said one bad word about you. We asked. And then some.”

“Guess you didn’t talk to my mother,” I muttered.

“*Enough*,” Michael said, looking over at us with a scowl and I dropped my eyes. “There’s also the fact that *we* know it’s you. And as Mick said, we’re here to keep an eye on you. But more than that, we need to get you up to scratch if you are to stop the Purging. You are cutting me to the bone, here.” He made a frustrated sound. “I mean, what more proof do you need than the *Libris Ides*? It wouldn’t open if you were not the one.”

“There’s also the amulet,” Seamus said and Michael grunted. I looked up to see a look passing between them. “What, you think it’s not the time?”

“If she won’t accept her destiny, what makes you think she’ll accept *that*?” Michael asked.

“Have a wee bit of patience and faith, cousin,” Seamus said and to my surprise, a smile twitched onto Michael’s face. Then he turned back to the fire. “This is yours, Sadie.”

From his pocket, Seamus withdrew a heavy silver chain with a sparkle of white fire at the end of it, like a star caught in glass. For a moment, it blinded me and I blinked as Seamus stood up, walking around the couch. His arms came around me before I could utter a word, Mick holding up my hair as his cousin clasped the necklace on.

“I can’t accept this,” I said, holding it up. “Woah.” The charm was a white heart, shimmering like fresh snow. No one had ever given me jewelry before and certainly not a guy. “This looks priceless.” I couldn’t stop looking at it and noted the symbol on the back. “Is it Fae-wrought?”

“Perhaps,” Seamus said wryly and I looked up to see him sitting back down with a smile. “I know not. It came to me in a dream and I saw your face, as well as this town. And when I awoke, it was in my hand. That’s Oralee’s charm, there. The white heart with a triquetra etched on the back.”

“I think the Fairies brought it to him,” Patrick said in a confidential whisper. “Wouldn’t be the first time. Seamus is the one with all the connections in the Hidden World.”

“Besides Fae trinkets,” Michael said, coming over and snapping his fingers. The Book of Ides returned and fell open on my lap. “Maybe she should take a look at what else is in these pages.”

"*Michael–*" Mick rumbled, but Michael shot him a look and he fell silent with a scowl.

"I know we agreed to wait, but we didn't anticipate–" Michael nodded at me. "Well, look."

The writing shone and shimmered with life, unlike any ink I'd seen before. At my touch, it briefly became a flame again, then went back to a plain book. The pages were heavy and crinkled in a musical way as I turned them. A scent of saffron and musty paper rose up from it.

"Not that," Michael said, glaring at the book. "Oralee's *vision*."

The book seemed to sigh, pages wilting, and then I froze as the pages rifled, turned by a ghostly, impatient hand to the end. Here the ink was so black it looked wet. And no shine of fire curled through the words. The air became stale and cold, the room utterly silent. The fire no longer crackled, the clock no longer ticked and something seemed to press on my eardrums.

On the page were hundreds of anguished faces. Scenes of horror and bloodshed. Wasted cities, fields, groves, and mountains. Nothing had escaped the despoiling of demons, who laughed as they plundered. Carrion birds, ghouls, and dark mages crowded the sky.

There was no light left anywhere. Not a glimmer, a spark or a star.

The pages flipped slowly, revealing more of the Purging. I wanted to look away, but I could not. On the last page, a sound left my throat as I stared at it.

A man in a dark hood raised his arms in triumph as Ordinaries fled. *Rowland Skinner is coming!* cried a voice, seeming to come from the book itself. Behind were the corpses of all magic kind, from tiny pixies to goblins to witches.

My hands were no longer shaking, but gripping the book as I took this in. It was slowly dawning on me that I had to accept this.

This was real. Rowland Skinner would awake. Endless night was coming.

The Purging would begin on December twenty-first, the Yule, my favorite Wiccan holiday.

Raising my eyes, I looked from Mick to Patrick to Seamus. They all had the same bleak look in their eyes, but there was also worry and concern for me. Then I looked up at Michael.

His eyes were stormy and his jaw was set.

The four of them were dead serious and the charm on my breast gave off a low throb.

My hand flew to it and I sensed the crowding of hungry shadows all around. Evil was coming, it was knocking on the door. Lips parting, I struggled to comprehend the magnitude of what was happening. What this all meant. It was like a cruel joke, only none of us were laughing.

Because the fate of our kind rested on my shoulders.

CHAPTER 7

"Enough," Michael said and I wondered with vague hysteria if that was his favorite word. The book flopped closed and he once again spun it into the ether. "Sadie?"

I didn't respond. Every beat of my heart echoed through my body. I was surprised the room was intact because it felt like the whole world was spinning off its axis and I was about to pass out.

Maybe this is a really weird dream, I thought, then Patrick's hand squeezed my knee.

"Bit much to digest, eh, lass?" the blond tried to joke, but his brows were knotted.

Um, yeah… Talk about your memorable Halloweens.

"Maybe we should let her sleep on it, think it all over and come to grips with what is happening," Seamus suggested quietly. "Eh, Michael? Did you hear me?"

"It's not like we don't know what she's going through," Mick added.

"Fine," Michael said shortly. "One of you take her back. I have things to do."

"I'll take her," Patrick said, standing up and pulling me with him. An arm went around my waist as he gripped me tightly. I squeaked as my chest overflowed more from my bodice. "Hold on tight, Sadie," he whispered, and on instinct, I fisted my hands in his shirt.

Again, the world whirled around us, but this time I was not alone. Patrick cupped the back of my head so that my forehead rested on his shoulder. In a way, it seemed like we were standing still while everything

else spun into nothing. And when we stopped, a twinge of regret went through me, then again when Patrick let me go.

Behind us, I could hear the thud of music, chatter, and clink of glasses. We were back at the party. It was all the same and yet it wasn't. I put a hand to my head.

Patrick looked down at me, studying my face and clearly reluctant to go back. Seizing my hands, he said, "Sleep well, lass," and then kissed my cheek. And then he was gone. Nothing but the warm memory of his lips on my cheek, which I touched with trembling fingers.

Turning around, I went back to the party, but it was a surreal and uncomfortable scene. The music sounded tinny and strange, the bass too loud and the smells too harsh. As much as I'd wanted to leave that room with the O'Sullivan cousins, I suddenly hated the thought of being alone.

Hugging myself, bits and pieces of the last few hours kept coming to me. The flash of Mick's green eyes as he flirted, Seamus pulling out the amulet, Patrick's hunched shoulders, the obnoxious doorknob in that room, the window I'd been stuck in, Michael's shadow against the fire, and then, the scripts of fire spelling out an impossible destiny for me.

"Sadie!" came Belinda's voice, sans British accent. "There you are."

Turning, I saw Belinda's lovely and familiar face. Her smudged lipstick and wide eyes. It seemed to ground me in reality as she cupped my elbows in concern. "Sadie? Are you feeling alright? You're white as a ghost."

I stared at her, wondering with a rising kind of panic if I should tell her I had to save our kind by the end of the year. Would she believe me or would she laugh, thinking I was messing with her? I wasn't exactly the first pick for power in Salem. But I told Belinda everything. Shaking my head, I dithered as Belinda's face became more troubled.

"Sades?" She gave me a little shake. "Talk to me. What's wrong?"

"I'm…" *The Savior or something? This Yule, I have to defeat an evil mage who's pulling a Sleeping Beauty and wants to stamp out anyone who doesn't indulge his dark ways…*

I couldn't tell Belinda *that*. If it sounded ludicrous in my head, I couldn't imagine how it would sound out loud. Stupid, presumptuous and laughable, probably.

Why the hell would anyone choose me for such a task?

"I'm tired," I finally said. "That's all."

“Sounds like you need a drink. Red Bull and Vodka it is,” Belinda crowed, naming her favorite. Her eyes were bright, but she wasn’t drunk and I knew she didn’t completely buy my story. However, she didn’t press, only brought me to the bar.

“Oh hey, what happened to Mick?” she asked.

“Um, he had to leave with his cousins,” I said.

“Oh lord, there are more of them?” Belinda shook her head. “I don’t know if Salem is ready.”

I certainly wasn’t, I thought, wishing I could tell her.

“Was he a jerk?” Belinda asked softly as we waited for our drinks. Her eyes flashed. “Do I need to go kick his ass? All their asses?”

“No, it’s fine. It’s me. Like I said, I’m just tired.”

“Here,” Belinda said, seizing the glass and clinking it with mine. “Cheers to Halloween.”

I dumped the burning liquor down my throat, but it did nothing except make my mental gyrations whirl faster. Desperate to make it stop, I pulled Belinda onto the dance floor with me.

But the whole time, the anguished faces of my kind flashed before my eyes, followed by the dark hooded figure and the onslaught of demons. I stumbled, my ankle twisting, and almost fell to the floor. Belinda grabbed my elbow, while another guy helped me back up.

“You okay?” he shouted.

I nodded and went to find a seat. They were all occupied, so I leaned against the wall, trying to give Belinda a smile. She’d followed me and was fussing, asking if I needed ice or a glass of water.

“No, thanks. Please, you can go dance,” I urged her.

“I don’t like leaving you…” Belinda said slowly. “Sadie, maybe we should go eat. Talk. Relax.”

“No, Bells, it’s fine. I’m gonna go home,” I said, desperate for space and quiet to think. “Thank you for taking me out and I hope you have a great rest of the night.” Reaching out, I pulled her to me and gave her a tighter and fiercer hug than I meant to.

Belinda gave me a strange look as I pulled back and she patted my cheek. “Get some sleep.”

“Bye, love,” I said, trying to fake a British accent, but it sounded Irish.

Her eyebrows drew together, but before Belinda could say a word, I was heading for the exit. All I could think about was the guys and the prophecy.

Rowland Skinner. Oralee.

The mortal race will turn upon all Magic, unaware they are doing Skinner's silent bidding. His hands will hold the world and every last babe, child, woman, and man who stands against his wicked heart – from those with a touch of Sight to the greatest of Practitioners – will be extinguished.

A shuddering gasp escaped me and I all but ran outside. Here, the cool air soothed my feverish thoughts and I took comfort in the deep silence of the hours after midnight. Head bent against the brisk chill rising from the ocean, I made my way home through the quiet streets of Salem.

Here, I didn't think so much of the prophecy or the Purging, but of the O'Sullivans.

I'd been so sure they were trying to trick me, then so sure it wasn't me, I didn't wonder at their reactions. It was clear they believed in the prophecy as much as they believed in me. The latter, somehow, was stranger than the former. As my boots clicked on the pavement, I put myself in their shoes, thinking about what it must have been like to deliver that dreaded news to me.

And how I rejected reality of what was happening.

No wonder Michael was so upset, I thought, and my resentment towards him faded.

None of them had expected me to deny the prophecy so vigorously. But it was a terrifying thought – one most magic kind laughed at – the idea of hunts and trials in this day and age.

But if the scales were tipped by one of our own, as unthinkable as it was, it could be. Fingers would be pointed, hysteria would rise and trials would start again.

Hadn't fear started it the last time?

Maybe Skinner is to blame for the Trials, I thought. *If so, he tried to fool mortals once and failed. I doubt he would let that happen again.*

I remembered the words of the prophecy and shivered, rubbing my arms.

Beware Skinner's black gifts. He will not strike at the powerful but lurk in the shadows, sowing fear, distrust and the most dangerous of ugly passions.

Stopping, I looked up at the moon and tried to collect my thoughts. It was the kind of night I loved when magic was at the world's fingertips and the songs of Old Gods played. Clouds clustered and vanished, the glow

coming and going, setting the shadows dancing. Crickets chirped from clumps of grass and small yards, while branches rubbed overhead and the wind moaned over the ocean. Even though it was All Soul's Day, witchery was still in the air.

Beginning to walk again, I gazed around, taking in the lovely, old-fashioned streets. The quaint houses, the tall, gnarled trees, and cobblestone streets. The small parks, cemeteries, and churches tucked in every possible corner. In many ways, Salem was a typical New England town.

Save for the hints of magic slyly peeking out. A string of Fairy bells dangling from a low branch over the street. Triquetras etched on doorways. Wind chimes made of crystals, sparkling as they swung. Pixie palaces hidden among birdhouses. A black familiar snoozing in a window. Glass jars filled with herbs to keep away wayward spirits.

My heart sang out for a moment as I took it all in, sensing the blessings of good, wholesome magic. Something fluttered overhead, snapping in the breeze and I looked up to see a rainbow flag.

Again, I was reminded how Salem had rewritten its dark past. It had become a community with arms wide open to the Wicca, weird and wonderful. People could be who they chose to be, love who they chose to love, and were celebrated for it.

I'd always secretly thought old witch hunters must be spinning in their grave as modern Salem flourished.

I'd never thought one would wake up. Or be a witch *hunting* witches.

His statue in Winter Park was unremarkable, to be honest, besides the coins. A man, sitting on a chair, head bent and eyes in shadow of his wide hat. He appeared to be deep in thought.

Or asleep. Is that where Skinner is?

The thought had my heart seizing in my chest.

A shadow went over the moon as I turned onto my street and a shudder ran over my skin. Unfriendly eyes seemed to peer from hidey-holes and I looked up to see the moon had vanished. All but running to my shop, I dead-bolted the door once inside and took several deep breaths. The familiar smell of herbs, wooden floors and books filled my nose, calming me.

Samwise came pattering over, flapping his wings and woofing in pleasure. I smiled as he rubbed his head on my ankle and bent down to pick him up. Stroking his head, I slowly walked around my shop and took in my

goods as though for the first time. Shakiness spread through my limbs and Oralee's charm seemed to shiver against my skin.

For a moment, I thought I could smell smoke and see the place devoured by black flames.

Shaking my head, I went upstairs and stripped off the gypsy costume. *Destiny, accept her destiny,* whispered in my head. But I still didn't know what to do. Some part of me was still arguing it couldn't be me. Maybe I was right and it was a different Matheson witch. My cousin Julietta was my age and we looked a little alike in certain light, could it be her? Or what if I didn't accept this destiny – would Rowland even wake up?

I stopped and pressed my hands to my heart. It was beating a thousand times a minute and the pulsing was loud in my ears, drowning out the wind and the creak of the trees outside.

It was then it occurred to me I was acting like I had a choice when I did not.

Not when I thought of Salem. Thought of all the people here, Ordinaries, Witches, Magic and Netherworld folk alike. To start with, Belinda, with her easy way around charms and herbs, the best nose for finding ingredients in the wild or the store in all of Salem. Pem, with her long fingers shaping beautiful baubles. Treysi, always willing to chat with me about tarot or palm lines, or to give me a boost if I got the sniffles. Quill, drag queen by night and a potion master by day. He would create the most intoxicating fragrances and bath bombs, his new business taking off by leaps and bounds. Fawn, the half-fairy, half-witch who ran an exotic flower shop and was good about finding rare plants for me. Junie, the werewolf who ran a doggie spa and always put aside treats for Samwise. Oliver, the baker down the road who ran *Valhalla Bakery & Café* and made the best cinnamon buns. Sprinkled with just the right amount of spice, sugar, and magic, not to mention love, the romantic baker's special ingredient.

And so many others, all of whom I cherished as part of our little burg.

I stood up straight, chin tilting.

I have to do this.

I might fail, but I would at least die trying.

CHAPTER 8

Next morning, I woke up late, but not hungover and still determined. I did not have time to spare that oddity a thought, as I flung myself out of bed and into the shower. After dressing in a simple black lace dress and patterned leggings, I braided my hair and tied it in a pink scarf. And on impulse, I picked up a lip-gloss and dabbed some on, along with mascara. In light of my resolution, I had a sense I should act the part. Or at least try to trick myself into it.

Plus, the mascara did nice things for my amber eyes and I smiled at myself, nodding firmly.

"Go get 'em, Sadie," I said, assuming the Wonder Woman pose.

My apartment was a small, cozy nook above my shop. Originally, I hadn't thought to live there, but then the former tenant moved out and it had turned out the rent was cheaper. While I had to wear several layers in the winter, the electricity left something to be desired, and the faucet leaked, I loved it almost as much as my shop.

Padding into the tiny kitchen, I filled up my rooster kettle and flicked on the gas. As downstairs, everything nicely lined up in a cabinet and I pulled down Chamomile.

No matter what, I'll keep my routine, I thought. Plus, a nice cup of tea in the morning helped start the day right. Treysi had taught me that. As the kettle heated, I fed Samwise some crackers, checked my list for the day and brought out some books to the kitchen table to peruse for a reversal spell.

A crowing sound alerted me to the hot water and I poured myself a glass, looking out the tiny window at the roofs and back gardens. Fog had risen overnight and it crept through the streets.

Sitting down at the table, I opened another book and tried to read it. The words were as elusive as that damn doorknob. Samwise was pecking reluctantly at his dog food, cracking the kibble noisily and I heard myself sigh. I knew I had to find a cure for him and I tried to pull my mind back to the books, but I couldn't stop thinking about Salem. How it only had an inkling of what was in store. Standing up, I grabbed a shawl, threw on some boots and hurried downstairs.

Outside it was still, the winds had died down from last night and the fog was thicker as I walked through the streets. It was quiet as I made my way to Valhalla, with no one out and about, and a crinkle ran along my neck. Try as I might not to, I kept glancing over my shoulder. Neither could I repress a sense of relief as I stepped inside the café.

Smiling, I nodded around at the regulars. Witches abounded if you knew where to look. The two older gentlemen in the corner arguing about the Dragon Races, the grinning dame in another corner with a snake curled up her arm, and then Treysi, swapping war stories with her cronies at their usual table.

"Oh, Sadie Matheson, you darling thing," came a voice and I turned, only to be engulfed in a hug. "I only just heard what you did for my Jaffre, selling his paper mobiles in your shop." Mrs. Brulien pecked my cheek. "Oliver Holmgren!" she barked at the owner. "Her order is on me."

"Sure thing. The usual, Sadie?" Oliver asked and I nodded, then turned to Mrs. Brulien.

"Oh, Mrs. B, you don't have to do that," I said to the rosy-cheeked witch. "And seeing as I don't get many customers, I only hope I'm not hurting Jaffre's business. Although, his paper chandeliers are so lovely, I'm actually hoping they'll help mine."

"Oh, nonsense! Like I care about any of that. What matters is that you believed in him and it's given him such a boost. He even went out to a party last night." She squeezed my arms. "You know Jaffre, he's a bit shy about everything. Even his lovely art and you coaxed him to put it on display." Her eyes twinkled. "Sure you're a witch and not a fairy godmother, dear?"

An appreciative laugh rang out. "I've asked myself that question." Treysi had been eavesdropping. "Morning, Yvette, morning, Sadie." I smiled over at her and she sent me a sly wink. "You know, Sadie," Treysi said, her accent making her words all the more arch. "Yesterday a very handsome young man stopped by my shop and happened to ask if I

happened to know you." I went pink as she grinned, shaking her bangles. "Boyfriend?"

"Oh, no, no," I said, as her cronies leaned forward. "Nothing like that. Barely a friend."

I have literally no idea what my relationship with the O'Sullivans is.

Treysi shook back her dark hair, streaked with silver in the most bewitching way, and her hazel eyes danced. "Blondie was a bit of a flirt, so I told him he better be nice to you or I'd have Deloise put a hex on him." Treysi laughed as the black woman across from her shook her head. "Now Deloise is hoping he wasn't."

"Oh, hush, Treysi," Deloise DuGraye said, although her grin was diabolical. With her tight white curls and glasses, Deloise looked more like a knitter than hex caster, but behind that demure façade was incredible power. "I'd be honored to hex for our Sadie, here."

Sometimes, when I despaired of my family and coven, I reminded myself that Salem was more than my home. It was family. Crummy witch that I was, there were good people here who did not care about that in the least. They were kind to me, even inexplicably liking and looking out for me.

"Hm, some guy giving you trouble, Sades?" Oliver asked, rubbing his forehead and streaking flour across it. "Need me to tell Nana Lou about it?"

I laughed and shook my head. Nana Lou was Oliver's grandmother, one of the most badass old witches in Salem. Right now, she was visiting a friend from her coven who lived in Florida and the last thing I wanted to do was to have her worrying about me while on vacation.

My heart squeezed suddenly as I looked around at the smiling faces. For a moment, I wondered if I should tell them and have them flee, but where could they go? Rowland Skinner's endless night would start here and spread across the world.

"Sadie, are you alright?" came Fawn Li's soft voice and I looked up at the tall girl with streaks of green and blue in her hair. She touched her chest. "I just felt the most terrible chill."

I shook my head at her, trying to smile. "Hi, Fawn. No worries, I'm perfectly fine."

"Sadie, if you are sick, you're in good company," Treysi said, now sounding stern. "And you know, Fawn's right, you do look a bit peaky. Something wrong? You need Eye of Newt?"

“No, perhaps a picayune pickup,” suggested Gabriella, her cousin.

As more suggestions were called out, Mrs. Brulien was studying me and I gave her a timid smile. Her eyes narrowed as she smiled back. “Seems like our girl has a serious secret.”

“No,” I said, grimacing and grinning at the same time. “No, you all worry too much. Probably just someone walking over my grave,” I joked and they rolled their eyes at me. “I just, I uh… I went out partying last night with Bells and I’m recovering.”

“Oh,” Mrs. Brulien said, exchanging a look with Deloise, who laughed. “Well, we were young once. We know the consequences of a good night out.”

“Tell us about it,” Treysi urged as Oliver handed me a paper bag with my cinnamon bun.

“I will, I promise,” I said, smiling around at them. “But another time.” I went to leave, then hesitated. The love I had for Salem surged up again, stronger, and I hated the thought of keeping such a terrible secret from them. Most of them had already read the portents, although many of them were still skeptical it meant anything.

I’ll have to see what the O’Sullivans say, I thought to myself.

After another round of promises and reassurances, I managed to say good-bye and actually leave. Fingers clenching the paper bag, I briskly walked back to my shop and kept my head high. But all the way there, my mind remained in the bakery, thinking about my dear friends and the magic that abounded safely and freely in my home.

Preoccupied, I almost walked past *The Witch’s Keep*. Without thinking, I stepped up to the door and easily unlocked it. I blinked in surprise as I walked in, since nine times out of ten that spell did not work for me. Placing the cinnamon bun on the counter, I walked around, making sure everything was in order and flipping around the sign to *OPEN*. Then I fetched Samwise, the books from upstairs and my personal *Grimoire*, a cross between a journal and a spell book.

As Samwise zoomed around the ceiling, I perched behind the counter on a stool. Taking minuscule bites from the hot, flaky goodness of the bun, I flipped back and forth through the pages.

Several times I stopped and stared into space, unable to pull my mind to the incantations. The Book of Ides was dancing through my mind. I kept seeing that image of myself and the reflection of the flame script in the eyes

of the boys. Looking up at the door, I wondered when they would come for their answer. Probably not before tonight.

Should I tell Delia? I wondered and my face pulled into a grimace. *Probably not.*

As I debated whether to tell my mother about my new destiny, struggling with both the hilarity and seriousness of it, a tinge of pride went through me. Maybe now she couldn't say I was such a blemish on the Matheson name. Maybe now…

The bells tinkled and I looked up, almost inhaling the bite of bun.

Speak of the devil.

"Darling, good morning," Delia said, smiling at me as she smoothed a hand over her sleek hair, pinned in a high bun and making her cheekbones even more prominent. Today she was wearing a lovely navy-blue coat, with a ruffled collar and flared out from the waist. For a moment, I envied her height – you had to be tall to wear that kind of outfit and complement it with knee-high boots. You also needed to be skinny, as I was not the kind of girl who could get those boots over her calves.

"I wanted to tell you something very nice…" Delia said, her smile gentle, and I sat up straighter, wondering if she'd already heard about the prophecy. Then her smile faltered, her voice growing cold and disgusted. "What is *that?"*

I glanced behind me as though expecting there to be a giant warty toad floating there. Then I looked back at my mother and raised my eyebrows. "What are you talking about?"

"That toxic confection with sugar and spice you're currently inhaling, Sadie," my mother said, her smile replaced with a snooty look. "This is why you can't lose weight."

Stung, I said, "I'm not trying to lose weight."

Delia drew back, a hand at her heart. "You're *not*? Do you own a mirror? Or have you given up on that, too and thrown them all out?"

You would think after all the times Delia had said something cutting about my weight, I would be able to brush it off. But I never could. Her words were the jab of a needle, one that would store itself in my brain and hound me for weeks. Shoulders slumping, I pushed the rest of it away and looked upwards to stave off the coming tears. I'd learned long ago not to cry in front of Delia.

At that moment, the bells jangled again and I swallowed hard, standing up and saying, “Good morning, welcome to…” I trailed off.

It was Seamus.

“Welcome,” I finished in a squeaky voice.

My mother glanced back in perfunctory interest, but then her face lit up as Seamus strode forward. He nodded, a soft smile on his face. “Morning.”

“Hello, there. I’m Delia Matheson,” my mother butted in, tossing her head and sticking out a perfect hand with perfect red nails. “Oh my, how have we never met?”

Raising an eyebrow, Seamus replied politely, “Probably because I’m new in town, Ma’am.”

Delia went pale at the “Ma’am” and I choked down a laugh as he submitted to a quick handshake. Then he turned to me and I tried not to melt against the counter. But it wasn’t easy under that sexy, steady gaze. The gray of Seamus’s eyes seemed darker, almost like a thunderhead, and the auburn in his brown hair gleamed. He really did have a quiet and fascinating air about him, ten times that of Michael Fassbender. And my mother was far from immune.

Yet he was looking and smiling only at me, totally ignoring her. As I glanced at my mother, her beautiful face suddenly seemed slightly garish. Her lips were too pouty, cheekbones too rouged, eyes almost too green. Her nostrils flared as Seamus spoke.

“Sadie,” he said and I jerked my gaze back to him. “May we speak in private?”

A lovely, lilting laugh tinkled through the air as my mother laid a hand on Seamus’s arm. “Oh, dear boy, don’t bother. I’m her mother, hard to believe, I know, considering how young I l--”

Seamus gave her a quick glance. “No, I had assumed as much.”

My mother’s face tightened, but as Seamus was perfectly polite, she quickly recovered with a smile, moving closer. “If you’re looking for magic, I can certainly help you.” She cupped her mouth, leaning closer to him as if she was sharing a secret, but not bothering to drop her voice. “Unless you require shoddy spellwork, of course. Then you’re in the right place.”

Lips thinning, Seamus’s eyes suddenly went flinty. “Excuse me?”

Clearly, he did not want to antagonize my mother, but he also was swelling protectively and his tone had a dangerous edge to it. Watching

him, my heart did a funny leap.

Once again, my mother looked wrong-footed and I had a sense of the surreal watching her try to recover. “I only meant it is customary for new magic folk in town to speak to a witch of prestige and power. You must have mixed up your Mathesons.”

“I did not,” Seamus said quietly, folding his arms and pulling free from her. “Sadie–”

“Tell me, are you from Ireland, lad?” my mother said, leaning across the counter so that he was forced to look at her and she smiled seductively. “I’ve always wanted to visit.”

As she prattled on at poor Seamus, who was struggling to hide his bewilderment and annoyance, I bit back a sigh.

No one was safe from her charms and I had to wonder if he'd give in. She was far lovelier and slimmer than me, didn’t look a day over thirty, and with more powers to boot. Maybe Seamus would go back and recommend to his cousins they train a different Matheson witch.

Looking down, I suddenly thought of my father, one of Delia’s more hapless victims. He was a mortal who my mother used to have a baby – me – and then promptly divorced. For years, it baffled him, even as I tried to explain in my visits that she was power-hungry. One of the ways she got her kicks was wielding her beauty over men.

Which reminded me, I needed to visit my dad. Sometimes Delia’s presence was so overwhelming I forgot I had a parent who loved me just for me. At that moment, her sharp, incredulous laugh interrupted my thoughts.

“You’re honestly here to see Sadie?” my mother asked, the charm dropping away and her lips twisting as she jabbed a finger toward me.

Seamus inclined his head as he gazed at me. “I am. I cannot imagine why you would think otherwise, especially since I have said that *several times over*.”

“I wish you luck, then,” my mother snapped, not used to being denied or upstaged, especially by me. She shoved away from the counter, her shoulders up and her eyes flashing. In a huff, she marched to the door and called back, “Remember what I said about mirrors, Sadie. Get one and lay off those damn buns.”

The door slam sent a shudder through me and Delia’s needling jabbed again as I adjusted my dress, suddenly very conscious of the way it clung to

my curves. Maybe this wasn't something I should be wearing. I went to pick up the bun and throw it away when Seamus stopped me.

"Not often someone besides the cousins tests my patience so thoroughly," he said, his hand warm on my wrist. "Is she always like that or is she ailed by some trollish hex?"

"Oh, she doesn't need magic to be mean," I murmured, cheeks flushing. Maybe that parting shot had been unnecessary, but that was Delia. "I am sorry you had to hear all that."

"What do I care what a cruel old witch has to say?" Seamus said with a shrug. "If it's true that is how she always is, jealousy has curdled her into something past recognition."

"Jealousy? My mother?" I scoffed. "No, she's as proud as they come and for good reason."

"We'll have to agree to disagree," Seamus said, making me think of Mick. And to my surprise, he went on in a thoughtful tone, his eyes suddenly smoldering. "I think she's jealous of your womanly shape. All angles, your mother looks as cold as snuggling up to a skeleton in a grave. You on the other hand…" Suddenly, he started, his square jaw tensing. "Apologies for my forwardness."

"No, um, it's okay. Thank you," I said, my heart overflowing. Seamus was so delicious, he was making the cinnamon bun bland by comparison. My hand started to lift to touch his cheek in thanks when I caught myself.

Woah, girl. Easy.

"You're welcome, lovely Sadie," Seamus said, as he gently let me go. Straightening, his eyes became wary, but he continued in the same soft voice, "I've come for your answer." He paused. "What say you, lass? Will you accept your destiny and fight alongside us or…?"

The question lingered and I once again saw those terrible black pages in the Book of Ides.

Gathering my courage, I took a deep breath and let go of all the self-doubt crowding into my heart and soul. Somewhere, deep down, there was a flame that leaped into being and the crystal heart on my chest seemed to hum. With a leap of faith, I nodded at Seamus.

"The answer is yes."

CHAPTER 9

Seamus's face broke into a satisfied smile. Striding around the counter, he embraced me and his breath tickled my ear as he said, "Beyond a doubt, I knew you'd say yes, Sadie."

"Uh, thanks," I squeaked, my heart beating into every part of my body as I inhaled his woodsy scent. Tentatively, I hugged Seamus back, fingertips pressing into the hard lines of his back and trying not to squeal like a besotted banshee.

Stepping away after several moments, and with great reluctance, Seamus took my shoulders. "Now, we must crack on, my lady. There is much to do, much to teach you."

Some part of me was still astounded about my decision and the prophecy, but I took a deep breath. Nodding, I glanced around and asked, "What about *The Witch's Keep?*"

"Ah, your lovely shop." Seamus also glanced around. "Will it be a problem to close up for a couple of weeks?" His eyes were troubled when they met mine again and I smiled, shaking my head. "I apologize for the inconvenience in any case. We'll try to get you back as soon as we can."

"No, it's alright," I said. In the back of my head, I think I'd suspected as much. "Can't be a shopkeeper and save the world – wait, where are we going? Are we leaving Salem?"

"Yes," Seamus said. "But only to a house a stone's throw from the town border. See, we don't want to wake the slumbering mage too soon. And since there's no telling what sorts of spells the bastard might have enacted to bring about the Purging, we must keep you safe and out of Salem until

Yule. If Skinner senses you…" he paused and looked away. "Well, a lock is better than a doubt."

"Hm?" I asked, raising my eyebrows.

Seamus smiled and looked back at me. "Better safe than sorry, as you Americans say."

"Of course," I said. It wasn't like the shop was getting much business. I was sure it would be fine. "If you give me directions, I'll be along as soon as I can."

Seamus laughed and tweaked my nose. "Sadie, you cannot get rid of me that easily. I'm here to help. First, why don't you gather what you need and then we'll close up?"

Nodding mutely, flustered at his gallantry, I went upstairs and Seamus followed. Again, I found myself enjoying how his calm and deferential bearing wrapped around me like a snug blanket. In a past life, Seamus must have been a knight of the chivalric code. His next words proved it and had me melting in all sorts of gooey ways.

"I must tell you, I like your home and shop. Both are charming. Do you do good business?"

"Um, it's okay," I fibbed, looking up at the tall specimen of man in my kitchen who I was certain I was starting to fall for. "Help yourself to anything in the fridge, Seamus."

To my surprise, a faint flush stole across his cheeks as he averted his eyes and smiled to himself. My breath caught. How could a man be so sweet and sexy? It wasn't fair.

"Seamus?" I asked softly, reaching out for his arm.

"Ah, it's nothing. You remembered my name is all," Seamus replied, meeting my eyes and giving me a soft smile. It tugged at my heartstrings and sent my ovaries into overdrive. "I'm not always the one who sticks in people's memories, you know? What with Pat, Mike, and Mick." He shrugged philosophically. "Not that I'm complaining."

"Of course I remembered you," I said. "And I don't think you're overshadowed at all. I think you're each wonderful in your own way." I put my other hand to my chest. "You have such a calm way with you, I envy that. I feel so comfortable and–" Realizing I was blathering, I stopped and snatched my hand back. "Um, anyways... I, uh–"

"Yours is a pure and open heart, Sadie Matheson," Seamus interrupted softly, his arms cupping my elbows and tugging me closer. He kissed my

hair. "Not sure I deserve such high praise, but I'll take it." Eyes twinkling, he let me go and twisted me around. “Now stop your flirting with this poor Irishman and go pack up.”

Glancing over my shoulder, still blushing, I gave him a nervous smile and fluttered into my bedroom. I was in such a daze, I wasn’t sure what I was packing, but I at least had the sense to grab my Grimoire and other spell books. Once done, I came into the kitchen where Seamus was fiddling with the leaking faucet. Only it was no longer leaking. *Oh, be still my poor heart.*

“Fixed it,” he said cheerfully. “Come on, then.”

Downstairs, I grabbed a few other things I needed, shoving them into my overstuffed bag and silently worrying I was forgetting something. Once done, Seamus took it from me and with a twist of his left hand, sent it ahead to the house.

“Sadie, know that we can always come back if you forget something,” he told me.

In the main area of the shop, I looked around and let out a breath. It was harder to leave than I’d expected. My eyes went to the paper mobiles created by Jaffre and I wondered if I should send him a note, explaining what was going on, but then Seamus patted my shoulder.

“You’ll be back soon,” he said and I gave him a smile. I was sure of all of the O’Sullivans, he was the only one who understood why I was dawdling. Samwise fluttered to my shoulder and nuzzled his beak against my cheek. “Who’s this?”

“Samwise,” I said, brushing my fingertips along the parrot’s head.

“Ah,” Seamus said, studying the bird. “So this is the little dog you accidentally turned into a parrot?”

My stomach swooped with embarrassment. “Yes, I meant to look up a reversal but I hadn’t the time and then my mother and you and well…”

I couldn’t bring myself to admit that I was afraid I would only make it worse, and at least my beloved companion wasn’t unhappy as a bird. If I made him into a platypus next, who knew how he’d take it?

“Aye, I understand.” Seamus held out his hands and graciously said, “How about this? I’ll turn him back for you.”

“Oh, gosh! Would you?” I asked, picking up a squawking Samwise, and all but thrusting him at Seamus. “I would so appreciate it, thank you.”

Seamus took the parrot, cradling it against his chest in one hand and snapped his fingers with the other. A brief burst of light went around the room and the snap echoed for several seconds. Then Samwise the dog was wriggling and licking Seamus's chin.

"Oh, Samwise," I cried, clapping my hands. "Oh, he likes you, good. I can bring him along, right?"

As Seamus passed me back the dog, who began to lick my cheek, he said, "It breaks my heart to deny you anything, lass, but even a familiar would be a distraction in the coming days. Not to mention, he could be in danger. Can you leave him with a friend? Just until Skinner is dealt with."

"Oh, I guess so," I said reluctantly, pulling on Samwise's silky ears. "I'm sure Belinda wouldn't mind." Putting the dog down, the three of us walked outside and I locked up the shop. Glancing up, I saw the sign creaking overhead and then I leaned forward to press a kiss against the door. "Bye, little shop. We'll be home soon."

"That we will. Where does Belinda live?" Seamus asked, draping an arm around my waist, and Samwise appeared in his other arm.

"Corner of Briggs and Webb, but–"

The shop spun away and I was clamped to Seamus's side. As this was the third time this had happened, I was starting to get used to it, but I still stumbled when we stopped. Seamus pulled me upright and I noticed Samwise was shell-shocked, ears and tail stiff.

"Here," Seamus said, handing me Samwise, who collapsed against me.

"Sorry, Samwise, but I'm sure Auntie Belinda will stuff you with treats." Kissing the dog's head, I walked up the stairs of Belinda's house and knocked on the door. There was a winking pumpkin hanging on it, which swung wildly as she yanked open the door.

"What now, Johnny?" she barked. Her hair was a mess and she was half in her costume, half in her pajamas. "Oh, Sadie, sorry, I thought you were Johnathan Bancroft trying to get back in my good graces." She blinked at me. "You're not hungover. How is that possible? Wait, why are you here with – oh, Samwise, you're back to normal…" Rubbing her eyes, she groaned. "It's too early for this."

"It's almost noon," I said with a laugh. "Listen, Bells, could you please watch Samwise for…?" I turned to Seamus.

"A few weeks," Seamus supplied. "Hello, Ms. Belinda. Seamus O'Sullivan."

Belinda sagged against her door, lips parting as she took in his exquisiteness and a breathy noise escaped her. “Another one?” Her eyes narrowed and darted back to me. “Um, sure. So long as you tell me what’s going on. Are you leaving town?” A strange look crossed my friend’s face, as though she didn’t quite recognize me. “Sadie, does this have something to do with where you were last night? Is something wrong?”

“Yes, and sort of,” I said, kind of shoving Samwise at her before I could break down.

“You can tell your friend as much as you think she needs to know,” Seamus whispered, his lips inches from my ear and Belinda’s eyebrows shot up.

“Um, so,” I started to say, then paused. “Right, there’s this dangerous warlock, but he’s asleep right now and he’s going to wake up this coming Yule. He wants to recreate the Salem Witch Trials on a global scale. And, apparently, I’m the one who will put him on ice or something.” Belinda’s eyes were huge and I hurried to get it all out. “Guess all those omens were spot on, although who knew I'd be tangled up in it, but I am, and oh, the O'Sullivan cousins have to help me train because I guess the Seer of the Ring of Kerry is like their ancestor and that’s where I was last night. With them. The four of them." Belinda blinked at me as Samwise licked her face. "Annnd, I think that about covers it. Okay, thanks, bye."

Turning, I hopped down the steps and Seamus followed. At the gate, his hand stopped me and he turned me to face him. I glanced back to see Belinda gaping after us and I took her silence as a cue that she, like me, needed some time to wrap her head around all this.

Salem spun away into green and gray countryside. The first thing I saw was a sloping lawn leading down to a misty shoreline, with a thick copse of woods on either side. Mist moved through the trunks and it was like we were hundreds of miles away from everything.

“Where are we?” I asked, inhaling the strong scent of pine and sea.

“Whistcroft Point,” Seamus answered and I turned to see a house rising up behind me. I stumbled back, staring up at the vine-covered eaves, the massive towers on each end, and hundreds of high, narrow windows. “This is Spelling Manor.” He let out a chuckle. “You can’t say the original Salem witches didn’t have a sense of humor.”

“How old is this house?” I asked as we went inside. The foyer was gorgeous, lit with dancing firelight and all warm wood. It smelled heavenly,

like cinnamon and cloves. “Wow.”

“Something like three hundred and fifty years, I think,” Seamus said. “Want a tour?”

“Um, *yes*,” I said excitedly, not wanting to leave Seamus’s side.

First, he brought me to a drawing room, explaining the architecture and significance of the manor throughout the magical history of New England. He was charming in his own, quiet way. Then we passed through a dining room with a large circular table and a shield burned into its center, before entering a large kitchen where pots and pans banged around on their own. Something delectable was cooking and I wondered where the chef was.

Past that, we took winding hallways, glancing in on rooms upon rooms. Everything was full of old-world charm, from the ornate rugs inlaid with gold thread to the tapestries on the walls of countrysides and mystical lands, to the woodwork itself. It was filled with symbols of protection and grace, spirals of woods inlaid into screens and curving up into archways.

While the manor was impressive, reminding me of a fancy city library or a church, it was also cozy. It seemed to inveigle you to sit down and stay awhile.

“The house likes you,” Seamus said, as we stood in a glassed-in solarium, filled with plants and an earthy smell. “Not surprising, of course.”

I smiled at Seamus, biting my lip as my heart fluttered.

Never mind Samwise being distracting, I thought, turning to watch the distant white-caps and torn clouds, *what about Seamus and the rest of the O’Sullivans?*

Next, Seamus showed me the library and a secret passage beyond it to a training area. There were clumps of chalk on the floor and a scorch mark on the wall. Seamus shook his head.

“Patrick must have been here. I see he didn’t clean up.”

“Hey!” hollered a voice filled with laughter. “I oughta singe off your eyebrows for attacking my character, cousin.” Patrick appeared in front of us and I jumped back. “I’ll have you know, I’m not done yet.” Then he grinned at me. “Sadie.” With a flourish, he spun his hand and a huge bouquet of flowers appeared. “Welcome.”

“Thank you,” I said, accepting them and inhaling the fresh scent. “They’re lovely.”

“Of course,” he said. “So, Seamus boring you with all sorts of dreary facts about the manor?”

“Not at all,” I said, shaking my head emphatically, and Patrick chuckled. “It’s fascinating.”

“Ignore him,” Seamus said, steering me back to the door.

“Where are you going?” Patrick demanded, striding after us.

“Finishing the rest of my boring tour,” Seamus retorted. “Why don’t you clean up?”

“Eh, I can do that later,” Patrick said, following us into the library.

Michael and Mick were now in there, arguing about something in a book. They stopped when they saw us and both grinned widely.

“Took you long enough,” Mick said and he winked at me. “Settling in alright?”

"I'm glad to see you, Sadie," Michael said, smiling at me and I smiled back.

Glancing around, I was once again struck by each of the O’Sullivan cousins. It was strange and definitely crazy, but each of them was attractive in a way that called to me equally. It was almost as though I were standing in the middle of a four-pointed star and they balanced the ends.

Without one, something would be missing.

Seamus’s quiet and deep nature, along with his tender thoughtfulness, Patrick’s energy and delicious wit, Mick’s careless brawn and protectiveness, Michael’s leadership and firm purpose.

I rubbed my forehead and let out a soft sigh. I had to stop thinking things like that. Right now, I had to keep cool and focus on learning.

“Why don’t we let you settle in?” Seamus asked solicitously. “The tour is finished for now. Pat, here, make yourself useful and show her to her room.”

"Come on, lass," Patrick said, offering his arm. "We'll take a shortcut." With that, we were exiting behind yet another bookcase and I couldn't help but let out an exclamation. "Yeah, this place has a lot of secret passageways and rooms. When we first got here, I got myself lost for half a day."

“You did?” I asked with a chuckle.

“Nah, I’m teasing you,” Patrick replied. “Sorry, love.”

I laughed. “Well, I’m worried *I* might get lost.”

“If you do, just holler and I’ll be there in a moment, I promise,” Patrick said as the passage ended at a staircase. “Now this is the back staircase, perfect for making out. Lots of shadows.”

“What, been kissing the suits of armor?” I asked, grinning.

Patrick laughed and saluted the suit of armor as we passed it. “You’re funny, just like Mick said. And no, I’ll have you know I learned my lesson after getting my poor wee tongue stuck to a metal man for a whole day as a kid.”

“What?” I asked with a gasping laugh.

“Yeah, my mother left me there to teach me a lesson. It stuck as much as my tongue stuck to that cold steel.” He winked. “Don’t worry though, my tongue *fully* recovered.”

“Did one of your cousins dare you?” I asked knowingly as we entered the second floor.

“Maybe,” Patrick said mischievously. “But I wasn’t about to fink on Mick.”

“I knew it,” I said, shaking my head.

"Well, as Seamus put it to me, the wiseass, I didn't have to go along with it," Patrick said and he stretched as we walked down the hallway. A huge window with a window seat at the end of it let in light. "And I've never fallen for one of his dares since."

“Now, why do I find that hard to believe?” I asked.

“’Cause you’re as brilliant as you are beautiful,” Patrick said seriously and I flushed. “And yeah, if the man challenges my honor, I’ve got to do it. What choice do I have?”

Patrick continued to charm and flirt with me until we got to my room. As it was last night, (which I couldn’t believe was only last night), he had me in stitches. Or blushing. While he was full of jokes, there was an earnestness there, too. And I sniffed my beautiful flowers again with delight.

“Here we are,” Patrick said, flinging open the double doors.

“What?” I asked, stepping in and glancing around. “No, this can’t be all mine.”

“Well, I’m always up for sharing,” Patrick said, slinging an arm around my shoulders and winking down at me. “Here, let’s put these in a vase.” He plucked the flowers from me and spun his hands. The bouquet appeared next to the bed in an ornate vase.

“Thank you,” I said, still gazing around in awe.

“This is the East Tower room,” Patrick explained, urging me forward. “When we were trying to figure out where to put you, I said this one. Thought you might like to see the ocean.”

It was a huge room, bigger than my apartment, with a circular curve to it. A sleigh bed swimming in pillows and gorgeous, fluffy blankets dominated one wall, while closets stood at either end and an open door showed a glimpse of a master bathroom. But it was also the aesthetic.

Decorated in purple, gold and blue, my favorite colors, with pretty tapestries and gypsy-like cloth hangings. Gorgeous figurines lined the shelves, from castles to unicorns to dragons. Mellow afternoon light streamed in through the windows, reflecting off the dozens of pieces of fairy glass hanging in front of the windows, wrought in the shapes of flowers, moons, and stars.

I walked over and stared up at them, utterly enchanted. “Oh, I love these.”

“Do you now?” Patrick asked, suddenly sounding shy. “I thought you might. I made ‘em for you.”

Turning to Patrick, who now had a sheepish grin on his face, I looked between him and the glass. “Patrick!” I was so overcome I almost didn’t know what to say. “They’re stunning. Thank you.”

“Ah, that smile is payment enough,” he said, back to his cheeky self. “Yeah, I’ve got a way with the Fae. My mother says it’s ‘cause I got a touch of the blood from my pap.”

There was a glint of sprite-like magic to Patrick, I realized. I could see it in his dancing brown eyes and wondered how I didn’t notice it before.

“Thank you, again,” I said, wishing I could give him something more than a smile.

Preoccupied and overwhelmed, I decided I should probably unpack. In my haste to do so, I’d barely taken a step before my foot caught the edge of the rug and I flew forward.

Patrick realized a second too late, his hands trying to catch me, but all he did was manage to slow my fall and go sprawling as well.

“Oh,” I said, suddenly realizing I was pinned under Patrick. He was hovering over me, his legs straddling me and hands by my ears. “I’m sorry, I’m such a klutz, but thanks, I mean, sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?” he asked with a lazy, slow grin and I swallowed hard.

The fairy glass on the ceiling caught a beam of sunlight breaking free of the clouds and the room was full of whirls of color. It haloed Patrick’s blond

hair and my breath caught. He was so handsome, with his molten brown eyes and that faint dent on his soft lower lip. I bit my own.

“I like you exactly the way you are,” Patrick continued, staring down at me.

Suddenly, we were kissing, my hands in Patrick’s hair and his cupping my neck. Dragging him closer, I was lost in the taste and touch of him. He had an air of the wild about him, something tantalizing and otherworldly. It seemed to awaken something in me.

His spicy cologne was filling my nose and I thought I could hear faint music. Our tongues crashed together as Patrick’s hands slipped around my back and my body arched up, eager to meet his. My heart was pounding and I thought I could feel his as well.

I want him. I want all of him.

Somehow, I'd gotten my hands under his shirt and they explored the warm skin of his lower back. Patrick responded by pulling me upright so that I was on his lap, legs wrapped around him, and the kiss deepened. I shivered as his hands gripped my waist.

It was such a decadent, passionate kiss, with a hint of sweetness to it. Sweetness that reminded me of Seamus. I broke off with a gasp, horrified.

“Sadie?” Patrick whispered. “Are you okay?”

I shook my head, reeling in confusion. What was I doing? I was out of my mind, wanting Patrick as much as I wanted Seamus. My breath stuttered in my chest at the thought.

I’d never thought I was that kind of woman. *Like Delia.*

With that, I was on my feet and apologizing.

“What’s wrong?” was all Patrick asked, raking back his disheveled blond hair.

Flopping on the bed, I stared up at the ceiling and tried to keep from crying. “I can’t tell you.”

Patrick flopped next to me and smiled at me, but his eyes were serious. “You can. Come on, fess up, or I’ll tickle it out of you. Were you not having a good time? Did I hurt ye?”

“No, I was… I… That’s the problem.” I closed my eyes. “I don’t think I’m the girl for this job. I'm not as strong as you all seem to think I am." Blowing out a breath, I put my hands over my face and blurted out, "I mean, I can't even decide which hot warlock to have a crush on."

Patrick chuckled and I opened my eyes, giving him a squinty look. “Sadie, lass,” he said, his face lighting up with that sexy, wild look of his and my heart pounded in anticipation of what he was about to say. Then he glanced away, as though thinking better of it and his face grew serious again.

“Patrick?” I asked, a hitch in my voice.

“Sadie,” Patrick said in a low voice, meeting my eyes again. “Listen to me. Maybe you’re so powerful… More powerful than even you know… Maybe you deserve *more* than one man.”

I froze, dumbfounded to the point where I couldn’t even form a thought.

Patrick leaned over, giving me a kiss on the forehead. As he sat up and got off the bed, I scrambled as well, still staring at him.

“I’ll leave you to get acclimated and unpacked. Make sure to look around your quarters. Check out the jacks, I mean, the bathroom, it’s gorgeous.” Patrick hesitated, then strode for the door. There, he turned and bowed, announcing in a posh accent, “Dinner will be served at seven.”

Then he vanished with a wink and I was left alone, trying to piece together my thoughts.

More than one…

Was he suggesting what I thought he was?

CHAPTER 10

The thing was unthinkable. I couldn't do that.

Was it? Could I?

No, I wasn't like that.

Or was I?

To distract myself, I grabbed my bag, unpacking feverishly and putting things away in a completely disordered fashion. Yet with each article of clothing shoved in some random spot, Patrick's kiss invaded my thoughts. My eyes kept straying to that spot under the fairy glass, picturing us there together and shivering in pleasure. Then his strange pronouncement would hit me.

More than one man? Like, four? Like, all of them? My brain kept screeching.

Yes, I was attracted to all of them. I couldn't deny or ignore that anymore.

As I finished putting everything away, there were moments where seductive whispers danced at the edge of my mind. Ones that had me imagining the five of us in bed.

Hurrying into the bathroom, I flicked on the light and saw that my face was bright red. I also noticed that my braid was coming undone and I took it out. Waves fell around my face and I thought I looked pretty nice, all things considered.

Patrick had been right about one thing. The "jacks" was gorgeous. A huge shower with all kind of fancy buttons was in one corner, a window in the middle and a jacuzzi tub was in the other.

Big enough for five my mind whispered.

With a squeak, I darted back into my room and looked around. A small library was set up in the corner of the room by the door, complete with a squashy purple armchair and a lamp standing on four clawed feet. Walking over, I poked through the stuffed shelves and found books I'd never heard of. In fact, I noticed some were embossed with what looked like priceless gems. Hastily, I put back one that might have been made of diamonds and wandered over to the second closet, wondering why I needed two. A gasp escaped me upon opening it.

It was a walk-in closet, with mirrors and soft lights. On one side were shelves filled with shoes, boxes of jewelry and hats. On the other, were hundreds of outfits, including every kind of dress imaginable. Some were designer, I recognized an iconic wrap dress by Diane Furstenberg and stepped forward. I'd always wanted one of those. Exploring deeper, I found creations that would suit a moon goddess, with filmy material and long, trailing sleeves and then some that would suit a warrior princess. It was the most incredible closet I'd ever seen, fulfilling my wildest dreams.

I spent more time than I should have looking at those outfits, marveling at the material and even pulling a few out. But I wasn't sure if plain old Sadie Matheson could pull any of them off.

Suddenly, a bell echoed through the house. It must have been seven. Rushing out of the room, I flew down the stairs, hoping I knew where I was going. I managed to make my way to the dining room, only taking a few wrong turns. As I approached, slowing down, I watched the sliver of light falling into the hallway. Outside, I paused, listening to the rumble of brogues and clink of silverware. My ears buzzed and my hands twisted together.

Finally, with a shaky breath, I managed to force myself to go in. Immediately, the conversation ceased and a hot flame of mortification scorched me.

It was obvious they'd been talking about *me*.

"About time," Michael said coolly, but he stood and pulled out a chair. "We've been waiting."

"Eagerly," Patrick said, twisting around with a suggestive grin. I ducked my head as I walked to my seat. "Hope you like roast, Michael decided to get fancy on us."

"Oh, anything is fine," I said, awkwardly sitting down. Mick was on my left and Michael on my right, while Seamus and Patrick were on the other

side.

“Here,” Michael said, once he’d sat down again. He began to serve me as Patrick poured wine. I was so flustered all I could do was sit back and nod my thanks.

“This is good,” I said to Michael after my first bite. “So, you, uh, cook?” I asked him lamely.

“I cook,” Michael said with an enigmatic grin. “And thank you.”

I thought back to the clanking pots and pans in the kitchen. Michael had been on the other side of the house and he was able to do all that? What kind of powers did he possess?

With my arrival, the table was quiet and I kept my eyes on my plate. I didn’t know what to say, so I focused on eating. Patrick wasn’t even talking. It was uncanny and filled me with a sense of dread. Maybe he’d told his cousins what we’d done and they were disgusted with me.

“We’re not at a funeral, you know,” Patrick burst out, making the rest of the boys laugh.

“Well, I didn’t want to go blathering about,” Mick retorted. “That’s what we’ve got you for.”

“Nah, it’s for my good looks and charm, cousin,” Patrick said arrogantly and I chuckled.

“You can ask us anything, Sadie. We’ll tell you anything you want to know,” Seamus said and I gave him an awkward smile. “You don’t have questions?” I shook my head quickly.

Michael let out a snort. I glanced over to see him reclining in his chair like a king and sipping wine with careless elegance. “You do. We don’t bite, lass. Fire ‘em off, already.”

“No, I’m good, I promise,” I said, picking up my own wine and gulping it.

“Instead of that, we could tell her the story of the Farsworthy Selkie and how Michael had gills for a month when he was sixteen,” Patrick said slyly. Seamus hid a grin while Mick laughed.

“Or we could tell her about the time you had a dragon’s snout for nicking gold from the Great Worm of Inverness,” Michael said, glaring at his cousin.

Patrick winced. “Oh, low blow. I was coughing up ash for two months.”

“You could tell me both,” I blurted out and they all looked at me.

Patrick lit up, but Michael hunched his shoulders. “It wasn’t my best moment.”

“Oh, come on,” Seamus said. “Sadie should know we’re not perfect, especially you, Michael, you’re intimidating enough.” Michael laughed at that. “We had to learn, train and make mistakes.”

“Lots of mistakes,” Mick said, reflexively rubbing his jaw. “See this here scar? Nearly clipped off my own head when I tried to summon *Claíomh Solais* – the sword of Nuada, King of the Gods in Ireland. This was only five years ago and I paid for my arrogance.”

“You tried to summon the sword of a god?” I asked, staring at him.

“Seemed like a good way to spend a Saturday,” Mick said with a sheepish shrug.

“Told you, you shoulda tried to summon *Fragarach*,” Michael said. “Your primary element is water. I bet the sword of the God of the Seas would’ve worked *and* not burned down the barn.”

I laughed and Mick did, too. “Kiefer is still griping about it. I had to rebuild it by hand.”

“Kiefer is our master at arms,” Patrick explained in a lively tone. “Kept all his tools there. You should’ve seen Mick standing there, eyebrows burnt off, clothes in tatters, chin bleedin’, and nothing but the foundation of that there barn left.”

“When it comes to battle magic, I like to test my limits sometimes,” Mick retorted. “You all know something about that, especially you, Patrick.”

“Battle magic,” I repeated. “So, there are different kinds of magic? I never knew that.” I winced and hastily asked, “Didn’t someone say something about the four aspects? And what is a primary element, exactly? Can’t most witches and warlocks only wield one?”

“Four, yes,” Seamus said. “And it wasn’t us, that was the prophecy.”

“Oh, right,” I said, wishing I hadn’t brought it up. I didn’t want to cast a big pall on the table.

To the contrary, the four became eager, telling me how I was an exception – I wouldn’t have a primary element, all four would be equally powerful when I wielded them. How usually, a primary element was just that, the first one learned and thus the most powerful. For Michael, it was fire, Mick was water, Seamus was earth and Patrick was air, although he was also a fair hand with earth.

“As for the four aspects, that will come in time,” Michael said cryptically, but then he winked. “Don’t want to get too ahead of ourselves.”

All four elements, wow. Most people are lucky to wield one, I thought, a little dazed.

Michael poured me another glass of wine as they told me more about themselves and the Ring of Kerry. It was a place of great power, a hideaway of magic that had survived centuries undetected. Netherfolk rubbed elbows with witches and warlocks there, and it had the greatest market for magical goods in all the world.

“South America has one that’s pretty close, but it’s a lot harder to get to,” Seamus said. “Deep in the Amazon jungle. So many artifacts, though.”

“And bugs, lots of bugs,” Patrick said with a shudder.

The tension in my shoulders loosened as the conversation continued from there. I found out the O’Sullivans had done a bit of traveling together, going to the four corners of the globe to hone their gifts. All of them were well-learned, but none more so than Seamus, who had knowledge on everything it seemed. But he was never arrogant about it, only happy to share information.

I also discovered their unique affinities for magic. Seamus mainly focused on abilities of the mind. Mick was a warrior, skilled in techniques from the Japanese Samurai to the Norse Berserkers. Patrick was more of an artist, able to shape almost anything from thin air. And as for Michael, he merely smirked and said, “Everything.”

By that time, I was four glasses deep in wine and I giggled. “Sure. So how come you don’t want to fight Skinner for me, then? Sounds like you four might be the most powerful Warlocks of our age.” I paused and glanced around the table.

Seamus had a sheepish grin, while Mick and Patrick looked delighted and Michael haughty.

“We are,” Michael said. “But that doesn’t count for anything where Skinner is concerned.”

“Pure heart, right,” I said with a sigh, fiddling with the crystal heart on my chest. “Not sure how that will do me much good, but…”

“It will make all the difference,” Seamus said quietly and we all fell quiet.

“Hey, what’s your shop like?” Patrick asked. “Wish I could have seen it.”

“It’s alright, I mean, I do love it.” When they showed interest, I found myself walking through it, explaining what I sold and what services I offered. “There’s a place for me to read palms, but no one has asked for a reading yet. Sometimes I think my mother is right and a witch shouldn’t be peddling to mortals. Especially if I’m supposed to be a savior.”

“There’s nothing wrong with the shop-keeping trade,” Michael said, frowning. “Many witches and warlocks, even Netherfolk, find ways to keep magic alive in the world. It balances out the Ordinary. Gives the sinner hope, helps the child dream and inspires the artist to create. It is a lovely profession, one as old as the gifts themselves.”

I was so floored by that sentiment, all I could do was gape at him.

“And you shouldn’t listen to your mother, Sadie, truly,” Seamus said quietly.

“I know, but you,” I looked over at him. “Well, you heard how she was. That wasn't even that bad, usually, she's going on about how a witch is an apex creature in the universe and such...”

The guys all groaned. “Oh, preserve me, not one of those,” Mick muttered.

“Wait, you met Delia Matheson?” Michael asked Seamus. “Why didn’t you mention it before?”

“It wasn’t a pleasant meeting,” Seamus said quietly. “She was a bit rotten, to be honest. A lot of garish beautifying and seduction magic.” He wrinkled his nose. “It was hard to breathe around her. And then, I didn’t care for how she spoke to Sadie.” His eyes flashed and his jaw tightened.

“Woah, Seamus, what happened?” Patrick asked, leaning over. “You never get upset.”

“Her words were despicable. Sneering about so-called shoddy spellwork and Sadie’s appearance…” Briefly, Seamus recounted the meeting and the guys grew thunderous. Mick’s shoulders swelled, Michael’s eyes flashed blue fire and Patrick looked horrified.

“She’s your mother and she said all that?” the blond exclaimed. “Heinous lies.”

“To be so rude to you – and she didn’t know who Seamus was, he could have been a customer,” Mick pointed out through gritted teeth. “That’s as rotten as troll funk.”

“Despicable is right,” Michael said flatly, glaring at the ceiling. “I’ll remember this when I meet Delia Matheson and I shall set her straight.”

“Oh, no, you don’t have to do that.” Michael gave me a look that said, *try and stop me.* “No, guys, it’s okay,” I said. “My mother has every right to be disappointed in me. I’m not beautiful like her, my familiar is a wiener dog, and I’m not living up to the Matheson name.” They still looked mutinous and furious on my behalf. “I’m not her kind of witch and that’s unacceptable to her.”

“She should accept you for who you are because you’re her daughter, Sadie,” Seamus said, his eyes on mine. “As I said, her jealousy has curdled her and she takes it out on you. You are beautiful, brave and wonderful. She has no right to say otherwise.”

“Oh, Seamus,” I murmured, wanting to give him a hug.

“Of course she is!” Patrick snapped and I looked at him. His cheeks were flushed red. “Sadie, don’t let her get to you. You’re a ride, lass. An absolute ride.”

“He means you’re sexy,” Mick said, leaning over. “And you are. The very definition.”

“A beautiful witch,” Michael said resolutely. “Inside and out.”

“Thanks,” I said, thrown by these compliments and their protectiveness. But also, secretly enjoying it. “I’m sorry, I won’t bring it up again…”

They were quick to tell me not to worry about that, that I could bring up anything. They were there for me, they reminded me. And by now my heart was glowing so brightly in my chest I was surprised I hadn’t morphed into a spotlight.

Or that might have been the wine.

After another glass, I was starting to realize I was completely overwhelmed by all the action of the past two days. My eyes were drifting closed and my back ached. Sagging in the chair, I found it harder and harder to keep up with the conversation.

Seamus noticed first. “You need sleep, Sadie. Bed for you, lass.”

“Tomorrow we will delve into the prophecy and work with you to bolster your magic,” Michael said, helping me to my feet. “Tonight, rest easy.”

“Good night, Sadie,” Patrick called as Michael led me from the room.

“Night,” echoed Mick and Seamus.

I thought Michael would leave me once we got to the stairs, but he kept his arm looped through mine all the way to the second floor. The manor was a bit spooky at night, the lights on the walls flickering as we passed and the

shadows were filled with velvet edges that looked alive. Invisible fingers tapped on the window panes, sending a shiver down my spine and I was glad for the tall, warm presence at my side. At the doors of my room, Michael opened them with a flick of his fingers and the lights turned on. Inside, he let me go and I smiled at him.

"Thanks," I said. "And good night, sleep well."

He said nothing, suddenly scowling as his eyes flicked downwards. Unsure of what to do, I turned to step into my room when Michael yanked me close and kissed me.

It was another searing, bone-melting kiss and I let out a small shuddering sigh when he let me go. His fingers forced my chin up and I met his blazing blue eyes.

"Do not listen to that crazy mother of yours," Michael said harshly. "I have never seen a more beautiful witch than you." With that, he stalked out and the doors banged shut behind him.

All aflutter, I floated into my room and pressed my fingers to my burning lips.

Yet, as I stood there, I suddenly wondered if I was going to have my heart broken by just one of these men or by *all* of them.

CHAPTER 11

I'd been in bed for almost an hour and had yet to fall asleep. Several times, I'd spooked, jumping out of my skin and hastily grabbing for the lamp's cord on the side of my bed, only to see nothing was there. But this manor had creaks and pots in the walls and floors that sound like invisible people were traipsing around. Or creatures with too many legs. Or ghosts.

Ugh, I hate undead things, I thought with a shiver.

Slipping lower under the covers, I wondered how sad it would be if I slept with the light on. Something scraped against the window and I bolted upright, only to see a tree branch waving at me. With a sigh, I mentally cursed this creepy old house and the boys for choosing it.

Pulling the covers over my head, I shut my eyes and firmly told myself to sleep. It seemed like I'd just fallen asleep when a screech right outside the window had me sitting bolt upright in fear and confusion. Turning, I a glimpse of ethereal, yellow eyes through the glass and a rush of wings.

"Damned owl," I murmured to myself, pushing back my hair and trying to calm my racing heart. All this talk of purges and warlocks had me a nervous wreck.

Just a bird, I told myself again, trying to find the lamp switch with shaking fingers. Rain was rushing against the window, hammering on the roof and my skin crawled with unease. It sounded like something was trying to get in and I had the uncomfortable sensation of being watched.

Something moved out of the corner of my eye and I whipped my head around to see someone hunched in the corner of the room. A scream burst from my lips.

“Sadie.”

A deep, comforting voice was calling for me.

Mick.

I heard the doors open and close, then the lights by my bed flicked on. “Sadie, what’s wrong? Why did you scream?”

“I-I…” I couldn’t look up, I had my face in my hands. “A ghost or something. In the corner.”

“A ghost? In the manor?” he asked gently. “It’s not haunted, I checked. Seamus is allergic.”

Lowering my hands, I looked up at Mick, whose smile and green eyes seemed to scatter all the shadows. Never mind how adorably handsome he was in a loose black tank top and boxers. Shivering, I glanced to where I thought I’d seen it and realized it was a coatrack.

Mick followed my gaze and one of his rough hands brushed back my hair. “See? No ghosts.” He flexed a bicep. “I mean, I could take care of that coatrack for you if you need me to, though.”

I let out a weak chuckle and said in a low voice, “Thank you. I’m sorry if I woke you.”

“Don’t be. You’re looking a bit peaky, love,” Mick said, his voice a little rough, and squeezed my upper arm. “Are you sleeping alright?”

“No,” I confessed, shivering a little. “This house is so big and there are so many noises. But I’m sure I’ll sleep better now – I didn’t realize you were so close.”

Nodding, Mick lifted his hand again, then seemed to think better of it. “Sure you’re alright?”

“Yes, thank you, Mick,” I said, impulsively reaching out and patting his strong forearm.

“You’re welcome,” he said with a small smile, turning to leave, then he stopped and squared his shoulders. “Do you want me to stay?” he asked bluntly. “I’ll sit on the chair and keep guard. Make sure no ghosts do show up or anything. Chase ‘em off if they do.”

Guilt gnawed through my stomach as I looked up at Mick. His green eyes were serious and fierce. If I was being honest, I wanted to accept his offer.

I wanted to do more than accept his offer, who was I kidding?

“Um,” I dithered. “Alright,” I murmured meekly. “But as soon as you see I’m asleep, you can leave. I don’t want you to spend all night on the

chair, that’s too uncomfortable. You’ll get all stiff.”

“Always worried about everyone else,” Mick chuckled. “Alright, then.” He moved to the armchair between the bed and the window, then clicked his fingers for the light. “Night, Sadie.”

“Night,” I whispered, turning on my side so I faced Mick.

I tried not to shuffle around, but I couldn't sleep. Even with Mick here, the house and space around it seemed to press on me. The rain was growing worse and I couldn't get comfortable. Or warm. I turned over, then back over again.

Only the brightest heart can burn out the endless night.

I shook my head, trying to ignore those fiery words in my brain. But now I couldn’t stop thinking about the prophecy. The Purging. Skinner’s wicked promise.

With each minute, I was more and more awake. Ugly thoughts threaded through my soul, the combination of exhaustion and everything that had happened. Dread pressed down on me, an accusing finger asking how I could ever think I was the savior.

Good Witch of Salem. Don’t make me laugh.

I couldn’t take it anymore.

“Mick?” I whispered.

“Mm?” he answered. “Still not asleep?”

“No, um.” I swallowed and rushed to say, “Maybe it would – would it be okay if you laid on the bed?” I heard him move off the chair. “Could you hold me?” I sat up, teeth chattering and heart racing. “I’m sorry. I’ve never felt like this, so afraid and so alone. What if I can’t do this? What if everyone dies because of me?” I closed my eyes and bent my head, the images from the Purging flashing behind my eyes. The anguished faces and corpses. “What if I fail?”

“Sadie, you’re never alone,” Mick said and the bed shifted as he climbed in. “And to be honest, I thought you’d never ask. All that tossing and turning was breaking my heart. Knew the night had gotten to you. Nothing quite like waking up and everything’s pushing down on you all at once.” He paused as I nodded. That was exactly it. “Come here.”

Two strong arms came around me and my head pillowed on Mick’s hard chest, tucked under his chin. His hands rubbed up and down my back, soothing me. Tension eased out of my body and I sighed, snuggling closer. Mick smelled so nice and clean, so yummy, and he was so *warm*.

My fingers were still cold and without thinking, I slid them under his shirt. He let out a muffled sound and I went to pull back, but Mick growled in my ear.

“Don’t you dare,” he whispered. “You’re as cold as Valkyrie’s heart.”

I was suddenly very aware I was clad in nothing but a skimpy shift I’d found in the dresser. One of Mick’s hands had slipped lower, ghosting over the curve of my ass and rubbing along my bare thigh. It sent sparks spiraling up through me and I shivered for a very different reason.

“Still cold?” he asked.

“Mhm,” I fibbed.

I wasn’t sure if it was magic or my imagination, but Mick’s body suddenly seemed warmer. His hands were causing heat to rush to every spot they touched and I was biting my lip, trying not to squirm. But with each passing moment, I was more and more consumed with need for this man.

It was a fiery ache, one that emboldened my hands to explore upwards, tracing past Mick’s six-pack and up to his broad, sturdy chest. A soft groan escaped him and his hands stilled.

I froze, wondering if I’d gone too far and also what the hell I was doing… Then Mick swept off his tank and rolled us over so that I was under him. His green eyes burned into mine.

“This will keep you warm all night long,” he murmured, his body pushed me deep into the mattress and covered every inch of me. Something hard nudged my stomach and my face flamed. I hadn’t meant to give him an erection. Or had I? “If that’s okay, that is…”

“It is,” I whispered, wrapping my arms around his broad torso. “Mick…”

Our lips met and it was a delicious, dreamy kind of kiss. One that swirled my thoughts into a meaningless spiral of color and light, as logic evaporated. I was giving in to the hunger inside of me, the hunger Mick wanted to sate.

We kissed like this for a while, comforting and sweet, but then the strokes of his tongue became teasing. Teasing turned into desperation. And that was dangerous.

Dangerous because I was arching up into Mick and demanding more. His hands slipped inside of my camisole, rough fingers exploring up and down my back.

Not enough.

Mick was tracing across my stomach, to my ribs and sternum. Across my collarbones, shoulders, and arms. My skin seemed a million times more sensitive than usual and I gasped out loud when a thumb flicked over a breast, the nipple instantly going hard.

His hands found both, massaging and squeezing without mercy. I was shaking, sliding my feet up his calves and trying to wrap my legs around his waist. But I couldn't focus, only hold on.

Now Mick was kissing my neck and I was gasping, lost in a spiral of bliss and heat. My camisole vanished and his teeth latched on to a sensitive nipple, making me cry out. His fingers traced down my stomach, teasing over my panties and I bucked against him.

"Mm, now you're warmed up, but I think I can do one better," Mick whispered, giving me a fierce kiss. "Chase away all those nighttime terrors."

His lips trailed down between my breasts to my stomach. Meanwhile, his fingers were still teasing over my panties and I shivered as my panties vanished as well.

Forcing my eyes open, I looked down to see Mick's head between my legs and I let out a moan as he tasted me. Head falling back, toes curling, every nerve was centered on that tongue laving my center. Expertly brushing the walls. Drawing patterns that had me crying out. Then his thumb brushed against my clit and my fingers gripped his hair.

"Mick, oh, oh," I gasped. "Yes, please, *yes*."

A cool breath blew on my molten core and I writhed, panting in pure ecstasy. Everything had fallen away but Mick.

Mick, whose full attention was honed in on me and only me. Mick, with his tongue nudging against the place that ached most. Mick, driving me out of my mind with need. I had all of his focus, all of him, he was mine and I reveled in it.

Savored these luxurious moments as I began to get closer and closer.

Tongue and fingers worked me, the best kind of magic, and pressure built in my belly. Pleasure, curling outward and dragging me toward the abyss.

"Oh, god!" I tossed my head back and forth as he sucked hard, groaning as he drew on my clit and slid his finger deep inside me.

That was all it took. I came hard, calling out Mick's name as I jerked and shuddered around his finger and bucked against that mouth. It was the

best orgasm I'd ever had.

Dimly, I heard Mick chuckle as he kissed one of my thighs and then the other before crawling up beside me. "You feeling better?"

"You have no idea," I whispered, my breath still short and my pulse still racing.

"I've got an inkling," he teased in my ear, his lips brushing against my neck and sending a shudder through me. My camisole and panties suddenly reappeared. "That was the hottest fucking thing I've ever seen. I almost came myself."

"Oh, Mick," I started to say, knowing he'd denied himself.

"Sh, you're all tuckered out," Mick said, pulling me against his broad chest and draping an arm across my stomach. "Sleep, I'll live." He chuckled in my ear. "Make it up to me another time."

I wanted to argue, but then he was stroking a hand over my forehead in gentle caresses, luring me toward slumber. So comfortable. So safe, held tight in Mick's arms.

It felt good.

It felt right.

It felt like home.

CHAPTER 12

When I woke up the next morning, I was hugging a pillow and it took me a moment to remember where I was. Raising my head, I saw the elegant headboard, the fairy glass, and bookshelves. It all came back to me. As did last night.

Oh. Oh my, I thought to myself, my legs rubbing together at the memory of Mick's hands and uh, tongue. *Damn*, *that was incredible*, I thought, wondering why he'd left.

Sitting up, I thought I knew why and I pulled my knees together, wrapping my arms around them. I'd given in to something I shouldn't have. I'd led Mick on. The urge to flee filled me. Bright red, I buried my head on my arms and shuddered. How mortifying.

I was completely all over the place with the O'Sullivans. Ogling Seamus, kissing Patrick and Michael, well, okay, he kissed me, and then all but having sex with Mick? What was wrong with me?

Nothing, said a breezy, carelessly confident voice in my head. *You want* all *of them.*

My face went even hotter, but a calm surety came over me.

I did.

And I cared, with all of my heart, about each of them.

What if today could be different?

The thought came out of nowhere. What if it could? What if I could? What if I could believe in myself for a change? Be as strong as those four gorgeous and brave men thought I could be?

Raising my head, I thought about it and was instantly fired up. I would be.

I had to wipe my mother's words and all those negative thoughts from my mind. Start fresh.

If I was going to succeed and save my witch brethren, then I needed to gain some self-confidence. If I was sure I was going to fail, then I surely would. I had to win against the opponent who was even more dangerous than some slumbering, crazy warlock bent on world domination.

Me.

Swinging out of bed, I marched to the closet and yanked it open. Assuming the Wonder Woman pose with my head held high, I forced myself to look at the outfits I'd told myself yesterday I couldn't wear. Today was a new day. I'd choose the most badass outfit in here.

I found it. It was a blank tank top with flashy gold studs decorated on it like stars and a short black skirt that poofed out around my knees. It slid over my butt perfectly and the tank showed off the right amount of cleavage. Pulling on tough-looking combat boots that went to my knees, I then fastened a cloak around my shoulders. Finally, I found some black eyeliner and flicked on a cat-eye. The witch in the mirror had a dangerous edge to her smile and her red hair was a fiery, glorious mess of curls. I grinned and she grinned back.

That's right. You're one badass savior, Sadie Matheson.

Striding to the door, I danced downstairs with my head held high and back straight. I was on a mission to believe in myself as much as the guys did.

They thought I was smart, sexy and awesome. But all that meant nothing if I didn't.

Flinging open the dining room doors, I announced, "I'm doing *this*. Let's get started."

I glanced around the table. Patrick had his chin on his hand, gazing at me with an intense expression. Seamus was beaming and there was admiration in his gray eyes as he looked me over. Mick looked stunned and couldn't take his eyes off me.

But Michael merely said, "Why don't you eat first?"

"Oh," I said, as my stomach rumbled. "Good point."

However, as I walked around the table, I noticed him swallow hard and he gave me a sexy smirk as I sat down.

"Once you're done, I'd be happy to volunteer *my* services, Sadie," Michael said.

Quickly, I ate breakfast and gulped down coffee, not wanting to lose the rush pounding through my veins. The conversation was light and flowed easily. There was a camaraderie growing between us and I found I fit in well with these four cousins. To my relief, too, Mick seemed fine. In fact, when no one was looking, he sent me a knowing wink and I sent one back.

Once I was done, Michael brought me to the training room behind the library, while the rest of the guys went off to investigate Skinner's statue. Today, the room looked different. Bigger and lighter, with a lot more windows.

"The room is adaptable to our needs," Michael explained, noticing my intrigued gaze. "Nice catch. So, today, let's try to improve something that seems basic but is often not. And don't worry if you don't get it right away, most magic users struggle with this."

He made a motion like he was throwing something and a piece of paper fluttered through the air before bursting into a thousand fiery butterflies. I gasped in delight, spinning around to watch as they flew through the room.

"Now watch," Michael instructed and twisted his wrist. A shadow-like whip sang through the air and they all vanished in a second. "This is spellbinding, or the art of defensive magic. Canceling out an enchantment." His expression became grave. "I'm sure you can imagine why this will be important against Skinner, perhaps more so than offensive."

"Isn't that a bit advanced?" I asked, wondering why we weren't starting with simple spellwork. "I've never even done defensive or offensive magic." *I didn't even know those were things.*

"Magic is not exactly like other crafts in this world," Michael said, stepping in front of me and placing his hands behind his back. "Other crafts take years to learn and hone, much like building a pyramid. Magic, however, grows by leaps and bounds. It is something you call upon.

"The better you are at doing that, the stronger you are. Yes, of course, you can learn different spells and ways to do so, which often take years… Plus, all the training and technique.

"But that isn't your problem, Sadie. Yours is the root of it all. Trusting yourself. Listening to instinct." He gave me a long look. "I've found the best way to tap into it is defensive magic. You're forced to not think, to only *react.*"

I nodded, wishing it was as easy as Michael made it sound. If only I could call upon my gifts whenever I wanted and act on them however I

wanted. I'd be unstoppable. Then I blinked, wondering if that was part of the problem. I was wishing and trying instead *of doing*.

That thought had me staggered and I lost track of what Michael was saying.

Is Michael right? Wait, how did he know? And have I been letting the niggling negativity and Delia's doubts hold me back all along? Just how powerful am I?

"Sadie, are you listening to me?" Michael growled and I snapped my gaze up to his.

"Sorry, I was thinking about what you said, about reacting and calling on your magic. It made me…" I wasn't exactly sure how to explain it to him. "Well, I'm ready in any case."

"As I was saying," Michael said, raising a brow at me, but there was a smile playing around his mouth. "We'll start small. I'll release one butterfly and you will try to cancel it out. The magic will not be strong behind it at first, but I'll switch it up as we go along.

"Sometimes there will be more, but they will be weak. Other times it will be one or two, but they'll have hundred-fold strength. You must learn how to focus your magic so as to not waste it. Control the flow. Too much energy and the spellbinding will backlash. Too little and it won't work."

"What do you mean backlash?" I asked nervously, watching as he walked backward from me. "And wait, how do I do it?"

"React," Michael said, throwing out his hand and a butterfly shot out of it. Its wings were blurs of blue and green flame, speeding at me.

I squeaked, throwing out my hand and there was a *boom* that shook the room. With a cry, I flailed backward and fell, landing squarely on my ass.

Michael appeared in front of me and extended a hand. "That was backlash. You used way too much power. Try to sense its potency, I won't mask it." He grinned. "At least not at first."

I was about to say I'd never done something like this before but I choked it down and nodded.

As he vanished and reappeared at the other end of the room, I called out, "Why butterflies?"

"I thought you'd like them," Michael called back, releasing two.

They were marginally slower but still speeding, fiery bullets coming at my head. However, this time I tried to figure out how much magic I needed

to stop them. But just as I thought I'd gotten a glimpse, they were on top of me and I ducked. Both of them spun by and vanished.

"Dammit," I growled.

"Sadie, have patience with yourself," Michael said, his hand landing on my shoulder. "It will take time, but every time you will learn more." I squeaked and glanced between the Michael next to me and the one across the room. Both grinned and my knees buckled. "Astral projection," he explained. "Just for you."

Yet even with two Michaels training me for the price of one, I couldn't get a hold of spellbinding. Often, a little voice wondered if I ever would. I either let off a wimpy fissure of magic that went nowhere or too much, causing me to go flying backward.

The backlash was the worse, I soon realized. It wasn't just that the energy knocked me down, it shuddered through my bones and messed with my abilities. Every time it happened, it would take several minutes for me to recover.

"I see why this is important," I said grimly, as Michael allowed us a short break and became one again. Rubbing the back of my neck, I rotated my shoulders and stretched. I was aching all over. "You put yourself in danger if you overextend during a spellbinding. My reaction time slows even more and it's harder to control the magic."

"Exactly," Michael said, very pleased. "I'm glad you realized that. It was part of the lesson."

After drinking some water and having a snack, I was ready to get back at it. I wasn't sure how much time had passed, but I knew it had been a few hours at the least. Michael was still keeping the number of butterflies low, five at most, and I was still struggling.

No matter how hard I focused, I couldn't figure out the right amount of magic to stop the stupid butterflies. It was always too much or too little. And it was infuriating.

We took another break, this time longer as Michael sat us down in the center of the room, summoning a picnic blanket, a basket, and a thermos. He handed me a sandwich without comment and I tore into it. I was ravenous and I was sweating through the tank.

"You can tell me how I'm doing," I said bluntly, between bites, looking up at him. He was lounging on his side, already having finished. "And don't sugarcoat it."

“You are learning,” Michael replied.

I scowled. “Not fast enough.”

“Is that what you think?” Michael asked. “Then that’s what’s happening.”

I sighed, wishing he would stop with the Yoda talk and give me something I could actually use. “Is there something I’m not doing? Some trick?”

“No tricks. You do not trust yourself and that will lead you to panic. Both of which could be fatal in a real situation,” Michael commented quietly. “Both of which also take time and concentrated effort to rectify. No magic can alter what you believe. Well,” he amended, “you could be enchanted, but that’s an illusion of belief. And it’s a paltry imitation of the real thing.”

I nodded, finishing up my sandwich. Michael handed me the thermos and I gratefully drank the water. “Belief, huh?” I thought back to that confidence I’d felt this morning and the promise I would wipe the slate clean. “Alright, let’s get back to it.”

Michael seemed surprised. “We could stop for the day. I know it’s taken a lot out of you.”

“No, I want to get this. At least once,” I said, scrambling to my feet. “And don’t hold back this time, I know you were.”

“I don’t want you getting hurt.”

“If you want me to learn,” I said grimly, “you’ll push harder.”

Michael’s eyes glinted with the challenge and this time, he did not astral project. Standing at either end, we faced off and I mentally chanted, over and over again, *I can do this, I can do this.*

His hand flung out and a butterfly flew at me, faster than before. There was a tickle of energy in the back of my mind, the touch of a feather and my eyes widened.

Is that it?

Trusting myself, I flicked a tiny amount of energy at it and it vanished.

“Sadie,” Michael exclaimed and then his face lit up. “That was it, keep doing that.”

Before I had time to respond, he flung out both hands and eight butterflies swarmed at me. Again, I sensed that feather-like touch, but there was a stronger hum in the midst. Sweeping out my hand, I spellbound the seven with bare touches of magic and the eighth spiraled off.

“Damn.”

“But you sensed that one was stronger than the others,” Michael called out, grinning. “You’re getting it. Keep at it. Again.”

As the hours passed, the number of times I caused a backlash shrank, while my successes rose in spellbinding. Soon, I got it almost every time. Usually, if I messed up, it was because they escaped before I could catch them, not because I wasn’t controlling the energy. So, while my reflexes still needed work, I now was able to sense them accurately. I almost couldn’t believe it.

My confidence grew though, with each success. Now, I was dispatching the butterflies with ease every time and Michael was now starting to sweat. Soon, I was keeping him on his toes as much as he kept me on mine. There was a humming tension tugging between us as we continued to work and more than once Michael’s eyes lingered on my lips or throat.

During the following hour, I didn’t miss one single butterfly and I wanted to sing out, I was so happy. And grateful. Michael had really hung in there with me.

Panting, I watched as Michael strode over to me. “Why are we stopping?”

“It’s nine thirty at night, Sadie. We missed dinner and I’ve pushed you enough. You need sleep.” I let out a frustrated sigh and he laughed. “What, you want to keep going?”

“One more?” I pleaded. “A really hard one.”

“Alright,” Michael said and he vanished.

“Michael?” I asked, spinning around. “Oh,” I murmured. He’d cloaked himself so that I’d have no idea where the attack was coming from. It would give me less time to react and figure out how to spellbind the butterfly. *No matter, I can do this.* I put my hands on my hips, waiting and watching.

Something whispered behind me and I spun to see twenty butterflies coming at me in a looping spiral. For a moment, my mind went blank and I hesitated. Then, on pure instinct, I threw both hands out. Instantly, the winged creatures vanished, leaving nothing but embers in the air, which crumbled in on themselves.

“Now, that was a spellbinding,” said Michael from behind me.

“It was, wasn’t it?” I asked as I turned to him, beaming. “I’m killing it!”

“You are,” he said with a thoughtful smile. “You’ve done good work. In fact, I think–”

“Who cares what you think?” I asked with a laugh. Full of elation, I threw my arms around his neck and kissed him. For a moment, he gave in, lifting me off the floor, but then he pulled back.

Holding me at arm’s length, Michael’s voice was rough with longing as he said, “I’ve been thinking about this for days, so don’t do it if you don’t mean it.”

My hands fell to my sides as I prepared a hasty apology, but then I realized something.

I did mean it.

Reaching up, I grabbed his shirt and stood on my tiptoes to kiss Michael again.

CHAPTER 13

Michael's kisses were fire and I wanted to sink into that inferno. We were both sweaty messes and I wondered if maybe the last hour had been a kind of sexy, fighting foreplay. As he gripped me harder, I was conscious of the world spinning away and I thought, *Wow, hell of a kiss.*

But then I realized he'd brought us to my room. He roughly pushed me against the wall, pinning me there and smirking down at me. Somehow, he'd gotten both of my wrists in one hand.

He's too good at this, I thought with tingling anticipation. *Wonder what else he's good at.*

"Just like our first time," Michael said, gripping my chin. "Although, now you're finally starting to see what I see. And that is how it should be. You need none of us to tell you how truly amazing and beautiful you are, Sadie. Although, I do so enjoy telling you. Especially when that look comes into your eyes. Such a fiery lust, full of yearning for me."

"Hmph, you sure about that?" I asked archly, surprising myself with my sass.

Michael's eyes gleamed. "Are you implying I should stop telling and show you all the ways I've planned out proving as much to you? Hm?" He raised my chin higher. "Tell me, Sadie."

"I…" I couldn't quite answer under that blistering look.

"Maybe I should just find out the answer myself," Michael said.

"Maybe you should stop talking so much," I challenged, knowing Michael would rise to it.

His hands tightened on me. “Oh, I’m going to enjoy this.” He nipped at my lips and I shuddered from head to toe. “And I’m going to take my time.”

The cloak at my neck unfastened and fell to the floor. Then Michael stepped back and pulled me with him. But as he let go of my hands, I realized I couldn’t move. It was like I’d been tied with invisible rope and I twisted against it.

“Hey,” I exclaimed. “Not fair.”

“Exactly. Glad I waited to teach you how to escape that one,” Michael said with a diabolical chuckle as he regarded me. He flicked his fingers, causing my clothes and boots to vanish. “God, you’re a gorgeous woman.”

I squeaked, flushing as his eyes ran over me in my boy shorts and bra. “Are you going to let me go?” I asked, squirming again, wanting to tear his clothes off.

“Mm, not yet,” Michael said, stepping around me. I gasped as his body pressed against me, his hands running up my stomach to cup my breasts and my bra vanished. “First, we play.”

His lips were on my neck and I melted against him. Eyes closed, I moaned and rubbed my legs together as his hands explored my body. He was deliberate and gentle, teasing my nerves into a frenzy as he took his time.

Finally, he skimmed the tops of my thighs, but then he stopped, holding on to my waist. I let out a moan of frustration. At that, he began to kiss his way down my spine, until he wound up at my ass, where my panties vanished and he bit the left cheek.

“Oh,” I said and he chuckled, then gave it a good smack. “Michael.”

“Just wait,” he said with a sinful kind of decadence and my toes curled.

He spun me around, crouching as he teased kisses from my thighs to my breasts. Then he captured my lips again. This kiss was rough and hungry, so much so, Michael lost his grip on the magic around my wrists and I could wrap my arms around his neck.

We crashed into the wall again, Michael’s fingers brushing against my aching need and I arched against him. He slipped a digit in and I whimpered into his mouth. His other hand was gripping my ass cheek and I swung that leg up around his waist, spreading myself open for him.

“More,” I begged. “Oh, yes, yes, *please*, like that.”

Three fingers were now pumping and curling inside of me, brushing that hot pulsing pleasure point. I was gasping and writhing, holding on to

Michael for dear life.

“You’re a wild thing, Sadie Matheson,” Michael said between kisses. “You need a real man to fuck you senseless against a wall. A real man who knows how to pleasure you to a point of almost pain.” His voice lowered as he nipped an earlobe. “Or maybe more than one.”

That last statement had me quivering all over and Michael laughed in my ear. Before I could respond, he was kissing me, his tongue dominating my mouth. His fingers were teasing inside of me now, dipping in slowly at first, in shallow thrusts. Then faster…deeper.

I ground myself against his hand, whimpering his name. Just when I thought he was going to end the torture, she stopped and pulled away.

Without a word, he propelled me into the bathroom. The shower sprang to life as he walked me backward and I stopped him.

“Wait, clothes,” I said, reaching for his shirt and he let me pull it off.

Michael was ten times more gorgeous and muscular than I’d been secretly imagining. A broad chest, muscular pecs bookended by mountain-like deltoids, met my eyes. There was a dusting of dark hair that went down to his belt and I swallowed hard as his hands drifted south.

One of those hands shot out and grabbed my wrist. He pressed it against his thick erection and I looked up to his blue eyes. “See what you do to me?”

“Let me take care of it this time,” I purred, palming it, and he groaned.

With that, Michael ripped off his pants, shedding his boxers, and nine inches sprang free, hard and swollen. Running my tongue over my lips, I smiled and gave in to that wildness Michael had been talking out. Again, I had a sense of *rightness*.

Reaching out, I pulled him into the shower and the door closed with my own magic. The blistering water ran over me as I sank to my knees and his eyes narrowed with need.

My hands landed on Michael’s muscular thighs as I settled myself more comfortably. The tip of his cock glistened and I gave it an experimental lick.

A deep, masculine groan shuddered, starting at the base of his feet and I grinned. Leaning forward, I put my lips around him. He was salty and delicious.

Gripping the base of that massive cock, I ran my tongue around the ridges and sucked him hard. I wanted to give him as much pleasure as he’d

given me. Just as he'd taken his time, I took mine. When his hands fisted in my hair, I knew he was getting close.

"Ah, fuck, Sadie," he groaned.

I drew him deeper, until he touched the back of my throat and began to arch against me.

Bobbing my head up and down, Michael began to guide me, my name on his lips and I was filled with exhilaration I'd never known. I'd never been able to pleasure a man like this.

Suddenly, he shuddered, going rigid. Then, he bellowed my name and I held tight as he came in hot spurts. I swallowed every last drop of him, feeling sexier than I'd ever felt.

Especially a second later, as I was yanked to my feet and shoved against the wall, breasts flattening against Michael's hard chest as he lifted me against him. We kissed, the water rushing over us and turning everything to a steamy wonderland.

"Sadie," Michael said, breaking off, and I looked down at him. He'd lifted me above him and I hadn't even realized. His forearm hair was tickling my ass cheeks and it made me shiver. "I…"

"You're flustered," I whispered, kissing him. "I didn't think it was possible."

"You've stolen my heart. Made me realize my body was made to worship yours," Michael said in a husky voice. The laughter died as my eyes widened. "Lass, I *need* you."

"I need you, too," I whispered, settling my hips more firmly against his. His steely cock brushed against me and my head fell back. "Oh, God, Michael, yes."

He pressed the thick head of his throbbing member against my slick heat, and pressed in. His voice rasped in my ear. "Sadie, you're tight, oh fuck." I trembled against him as his warmth breath whisked over my neck. "You feel better than I ever dreamed." With controlled power, he plunged forward, inch by inch, until he filled me entirely. "Are you alright?"

"Yes!" I squirmed as my walls adjusted and his cock pressed against that pleasure point deep inside me. "Yes, oh, yes, just please move or…" I was clawing at his back, gasping. "Michael!"

With a savage growl, Michael began to thrust into me, his muscles bunching with the concentrated effort. They contracted under my hands as I

was pressed harder between him and the wall. Bouncing on him, I mewled helplessly, begging for more, so much more.

"Tell me what you want, Sadie," Michael rasped. "I'll give it to you."

"Harder, faster, mm, yes. Just don't stop," I gasped as the pendant on my chest began to rise and fall as well. "Oh, Michael."

"Oh, I do love how you say my name," Michael breathed in my ear, his hips pounding against mine now as he filled me over and over. "And I love the way you feel, angel."

My eyes pricked with tears at the unexpected sweetness of it or maybe it was just the sheer amount of pleasure was too much to take. Our bodies were slipping and sliding together in the water, our hands holding on to each other and our shared bliss rising in a wave together.

I forgot everything as I called out Michael's name.

He was mine. They were all mine.

Gripping his hips, I pulled him deeper until my eyes crossed with every thrust of his stiff cock. He dropped his hand between us and teased my clit, making me stiffen.

The pressure was growing to point break and my channel clenched him like a fist as he worked himself inside me. So thick…so deep.

"I'm going to come," I murmured, my body feeling like it was made of light as blood rushed to my ears. It was all too much. The thick muscles pressing against me as he moved. The way his deft fingers knew exactly how to tease and pleasure me as he went.

The orgasm hit me like a freight train and I arched my back, taking him deeper as I came, my channel clasping around his swollen shaft. My whole body shook with racking sobs as ecstasy roared through me.

Michael was right behind, groaning, his hips bucking against mine as he exploded deep inside me in a hot rush. He rocked forward, grinding his pelvis against mine as he muttered my name.

The aftershocks arced between us, another tie that bound us even more tightly together.

For a long while, we stayed like that, locked together. Trying to catch our breath…find our footing again after hurtling off the earth.

Gently, he slid out and my body cried out at the loss. But then Michael was kissing me, his hands all over my body and I was letting myself explore his back and poke that hard butt.

Suddenly, I realized he'd gotten hard again. Almost at the same time, Michael spun me around and he growled in my ear, "Bend over, hands on the wall."

I did as he said, my body instantly responding to this dominant side of him, but I still couldn't resist tossing my hair and saying, "Guess you were a bit too eager to take your time, huh, big guy?"

A broad palm slapped my ass and I squeaked, head falling forward. His fingers brushed forward to caress my outer lips and I shuddered, eyes closing. I was going to pay for that. Michael then began to tease the tip of his hard cock against me, followed by his fingers. Reaching up, he tweaked my nipples and I lifted myself up onto my toes, trying to find release any way I could.

"Stay still," Michael ordered and I shivered. Suddenly, his tongue ran along my seam and I cried out. "You like that?" He began tasting me and as the pleasure began to rise, he stopped.

"Michael!" I cried out in frustration.

"You're right, I can't wait," he groaned, his cock suddenly plunging into me. After his tongue, I was sensitive and I screamed out in pleasure. "Oh, and neither could you, you cheeky devil."

My hands were sliding on the wall as Michael began to move against me, his hands on my hips. I was gasping, when his foot suddenly nudged mine further apart and he began to hit that deep spot harder. Gasping and shaking, waves of pleasure rolled over me.

His cock plunged into me over and over, in a perfect rhythm. It stoked my nerves to the point where I was utterly given over to sensation. All I could feel was Michael, but I didn't know where he ended and I began.

At that moment, I shattered hard and Michael pulled me up against him. His lips crashed onto mine as I came, again and again, then he came as well. I was gasping and he was still inside of me. His body was shaking with the power of that orgasm as well.

When we came apart and to our senses, Michael stared at me. Reaching out, he brushed a thumb along my cheek and said in a shaky voice, "Damn, that was…"

"I know," I said, quivering from head to toe.

"Here, let's get cleaned up and to bed. I think it's late," Michael said. He got the soap and quickly washed me, as I clumsily tried to wash him.

Outside of the shower, he moved a hand over my hair as I wrapped myself in a towel and the curls instantly dried to perfection.

He did the same to his own hair and I laughed. “I didn’t think you’d use magic on hair.”

Michael gave me a superior look. “A warlock should always look his best. Especially for his lady.”

His lady.

The words sent a shudder of warmth through me.

Out in my room, I found pajamas and Michael pulled on a pair of boxers.

“Will you stay?” I asked shyly.

“I was never leaving,” Michael declared gruffly, but he smiled at me.

He followed me into bed and we lay face to face, his arm across my waist and my hands playing across his chest. “You’re so handsome,” I murmured.

“Thank you,” Michael said with a warm laugh.

“And I appreciate everything you’ve done for me today,” I said.

“Oh?” Michael asked in a teasing voice. “Anything in particular?”

I smiled at him and moved closer. “I think you know.”

He rolled onto his back and pulled my head down to his chest. With a hand on my hair, Michael said, “I do. And I also know I’ve more than worn you out.” I burst out laughing at that. “Well, I have,” he said arrogantly. “You need sleep.” His grip tightened and he whispered in a serious voice, “That way you’re ready for what tomorrow brings.”

"Mm," I said, snuggling against my big, serious, sweet and seriously sexy Michael. "Can't wait."

CHAPTER 14

Distant thunder woke me the next morning.

"Stupid New England weather." I yawned into the pillow and rolled over, eyes still closed. My pajama pants had rolled up on one leg and I used the other to roll it back down, conscious of a bone-deep soreness that tingled more than it ached.

Oh!

Choking down a chuckle, I peeped between my eyelashes and saw Michael's sleeping face inches from mine. Butterflies fluttered through me. *He's still here.*

Less stern in sleep, Michael's delicious lips curved up as though he was dreaming of last night. Sitting up quietly, I reveled and remembered myself.

You've stolen my heart. Made me realize my body was made to worship yours.

That damn O'Sullivan sweetness, I thought, my eyes tearing. It got me every time.

For at least ten minutes, I watched Michael sleep and resisted the urge to play with his hair. Then I glanced at the clock and blinked in surprise. It was almost nine in the morning. My eyes strayed to the window. I'd thought it was maybe five or six, the darkness outside was so complete.

Lightning ripped by the panes, illuminating the room and I yelped. A crackling boom sounded overhead, one that shook the house and Michael woke instantly. His hands shot out, grabbing me and yanking me close as his eyes flew around the room. Another crack sounded and he let out a sigh of relief. Then his eyes met mine and a slow smirk spread across his face.

"Ha, jumpy?" I teased and he gave me a look. "Um, good morning?"

“I thought we were being invaded by the army of the dead,” Michael said, flopping back down on the pillows and pulling me with him. “I’m not jumpy, I’m protecting my own.”

“Mm, well it’s just bad weather,” I said, looking up at him and internally squealing.

Michael’s hands moved over my hair and my fingers tightened on him. “We should probably get up.” I watched him, taking in his mellow morning voice and the shadows on his cheeks. He hadn’t moved, only glanced at the clock. “Shit.” Laughter rumbled in his chest. “It’s nine?”

“That’s not *that* late,” I said.

“Mm, no, I guess not.” Michael wrapped me in an embrace. “Five more minutes.”

Closing my eyes, I rested on his broad chest, letting my fingers trace across the hair. It was cozy to lie here in his arms, listening to the rain slash against the windows and the wind roar through the forest.

Michael made a satisfied sound and pulled me closer. “Lass, feels like a dream to wake up with you.”

“What about last night?” I asked, grinning to myself.

“Told you, I’d been thinking about it for days,” Michael said.

“We only met the other day, though,” I pointed out. “How long – I mean…”

“I know what you mean,” Michael said and I opened my eyes, raising my head. His hand caught my cheek, a thumb brushing my lower lip, and I shivered. “Well, there’re some things we haven’t told you yet.” Curiosity filled me and he shook his head. “All in good time. I’ll tell you this though. Once Seamus found you, he shared you with all of us.” His throat worked. “Then I saw you in person a few days ago and…”

I pushed myself up higher. “Why didn’t you say hello?”

“Yeah, ‘cause you were real receptive at that first meeting,” Michael said, rolling his eyes. I gave him a sheepish smile. “I had to be patient, no matter how much it killed me.”

“Bet that wasn’t easy,” I teased him.

In one fluid motion, I was under him and Michael’s lips brushed against my neck. “You have no idea,” he whispered in my ear. I gasped as his hand slid into my pajamas. “But you’re here now.”

Two hours later, we finally went downstairs for breakfast. Michael kept his arm around me the whole time and I leaned into him, bubbling over with

laughter.

The storm had worsened, to the point where it seemed as though morning had never come. The manor was still snug in the storm, with the lamps blazing and the fires roaring, but I couldn't repress a shiver as we passed a landing window.

Endless night.

At that moment, blue lightning forked across the sky and I pulled my sweater around me tightly. Under all my joy, there was a sense of trepidation, one I couldn't put my finger on.

The thought flew out of my head as we went into the dining room. Swallowing, I waited for covetous, angry looks or maybe a caustic comment, but we were hailed with enthusiasm.

"I like that green sweater on you, Sadie, brings out your eyes," Mick said, pulling out my chair. "Coffee? Kippers? Eggs?"

"Coffee and eggs, thank you," I said, trying to subtly check him for signs of jealousy. But Mick merely looked amused as he made me a plate and poured me coffee.

"You know, I had to cook breakfast this morning," Seamus said, leaning towards Michael.

"Did you now?" Michael asked, taking a seat and tearing into a sausage. "What?" He cocked an eyebrow at his cousin. "Did you die?"

"I almost did," Patrick said through a thick mouth of eggs. "You know how long it took me to pry him away from his books? That and he kept insisting we wait for you."

"Well, it all worked out, then," Michael said. "Damn, this is good, thank you, Seamus."

Seamus's eyebrows rose, while Mick and Patrick exchanged a grin. Reaching over, Mick tugged on my hair and said in a stage whisper, "Someone's in a good mood."

"Mhm," Michael commented, snapping his fingers and a newspaper appeared. He vanished behind it, ignoring Patrick's silent laughter, Mick's grins and Seamus's curious gaze.

Beyond that, nothing else was said. The jealousy I'd feared was almost laughable now. None of the guys minded, if anything, they seemed intent on trying to get a rise out of Michael. However, he'd retreated into his unruffled self and ignored them until he was done reading the paper. Then

he gave them a rundown of the spellbinding lesson yesterday. More than once, I flushed at his praise.

Mick whistled. “Sadie, I’m not surprised, but I’m a wee envious. It took me a year to learn how to spellbind like that.”

“Well,” I said, “I have quite a deadline.”

“Nah, you’re brilliant. What’s on the schedule, today, Michael? More defensive?” Mick’s eyes glinted. “Maybe offensive?”

“No, no battle magic yet,” Michael said, folding his hands and resting his chin on them. “And we never got around to working on the prophecy. Seamus.”

His cousin started and looked up from his book. “What’s that?”

“You’re working with Sadie today.” Michael’s eyes shot to Patrick and Mick. “As for you two knuckleheads, you can work with me on lesson plans. I don’t want you disturbing them.”

“Sounds good to me,” I said, sipping at my coffee and wondering how Samwise was doing. *Should I call Belinda?* I frowned to myself. *And should I tell my mother where I am?*

“Sadie?” Seamus’s voice broke through my thoughts and I looked up to see him regarding me with trepidation. I blinked in surprise. “Is that not okay?”

“Huh?” I shook my head.

“Stop spacing out,” Michael barked, but a note of amused affection belied it. “Seamus, you’ll have to watch her – she’s divvy like that, getting lost in her daydreams.”

“Ah, okay,” Seamus said, his gaze downcast. I studied him, a twinge of alarm in my chest.

Was something wrong with him? Or was Seamus not jealous, but wounded?

We left for the library together, not talking the entire time, and my alarm increased. Once the doors were shut behind us, I pursed my lips, determined to find out what was going on. Maybe explain myself. Although, with the latter, I wasn’t sure what to say.

But before I got a chance, Seamus gave me a worried look. “Do you not want to…?” He trailed off and looked away. “I get it if you think books aren’t much of a help to stop Skinner.”

“What?” I asked, watching him walk away and lean against the edge of a table. “No, not at all. I love reading. And I haven’t had a chance to look at

this library…” *Or spend time with you.*

“Well, you looked unhappy at the end of breakfast,” Seamus said, tracing a pattern on the table. “I get it if you’d rather learn spells and such.”

“Oh, Seamus, no,” I said, catching his face in both of my hands and forcing him to look at me. “I started worrying about Samwise and my mother. It had nothing to do with you.”

“Are you sure?” he asked in a husky voice, his gray eyes dark and face inches from mine.

Giving in to impulse, I leaned in and kissed him.

Seamus went rigid and I went to pull away, then his arms wrapped around me. He took over and I melted against him. Seamus took his time, his lips finding every corner of my own until they parted. Then he stroked his tongue inside, gentle and savoring, until I quivered in his arms. When he pulled away, grinning, I had to hold on to his shoulders to keep myself upright.

“Wh-what were we talking about?” I asked.

“You’re worried about Samwise,” Seamus said. “I’m sure he’s fine. And in a few days, perhaps we can take a break to visit. As for your mother, leave that mess enough alone.”

“No,” I said, swatting him lightly. “*You* didn’t think I wanted to spend time with you.”

Seamus gave me a sheepish grin. “Maybe a wee bit.” His eyes glinted, and he stole a quick kiss, along with my breath. “Not anymore.”

“Let me make sure,” I said, leaning in and flattening myself against him.

After several more minutes of kissing, Seamus pulled away and sat me down at the table, then began to pull down books. I watched him, a finger tracing my lips back and forth.

I’d kissed Seamus without any kind of self-restraint, wanting him to know how much I cared and admired him. There’d been a question in his eyes, questioning himself, and I’d recognized it. While his cousins had brash egos, Seamus’s was a bit more fragile and my heart ached.

How well I understood. How many times had I seen that look in my own eyes?

But more than that – more even than the fact that he was tall, that his butt looked great in those black jeans, that his hair glinted with auburn and

his gray eyes did something to my soul – it was because Seamus had wanted me to kiss him. It was *right*. We belonged together.

We all did.

At least, I think we do...

Is that okay? To split my heart four ways? I shuddered. *Ugh, splitting makes me think of Horcruxes and Voldemort and that cannot be okay.*

“Sadie, are you worried about your dog again?” Seamus asked, brushing a hand over my hair and sitting down next to me. I shook my head. “What is it?”

“I don’t want to split my heart,” I blurted out and Seamus started. “No, not literally.”

He laughed and the tension eased out of his shoulders. “Well, we are sorcerers, you have to be specific.” His gaze became thoughtful and he studied me for a moment. “Ah, I’ve troubled you about how there is one Sadie and four of us.”

Hunching my shoulders, I nodded. How could I explain that all four of them seemed to belong in my heart equally? That I didn’t favor one over the others? That I wanted them all?

“You’re not splitting your heart, Sadie,” Seamus said, frowning. “I thought Patrick explained this to you. That’s why I was…”

“Patrick? Well, he said something about being powerful. How maybe I deserved more than one man…” Seamus had put a hand over his eyes and groaned. “What?”

“I should have known that fool would think that would explain it,” Seamus muttered. “Sadie, lass, not only are you powerful, but you are about to face one of the gravest threats the Hidden World has ever seen.” He paused and I saw him thinking hard. “Oralee’s prophecy was not taken lightly in the Ring of Kerry. As her descendants, we inherited the most important task–”

“Babysitting me?” I interrupted with a sigh.

“Training and taking care of you,” Seamus said, his eyes soft. “Lass, I won’t lie, there are dark days ahead and you will have to meet this threat. We will be there, but only you can stop it. Here, let me tell you a story. Michael wanted to wait, but I think you need to hear it now.

“The day you came of age, each of us sensed you for the first time.” His fingers brushed across my lips. “And we each fell deeply, madly in love, how could we not?” My eyes went wide and my lips parted. “You were so

warm, so full of life and laughter. It was a pure, poignant feeling, one that took my breath away and brought tears to my wee eyes.

“We were overcome by the depths of you. Your heart and your power.” Seamus laughed reminiscently. “Of course, that changed and deepened as we got older, becoming worthy of the men who could love a heart as big and pure as yours, with more than enough room for each of us.”

For the second time that day, my eyes filled with tears, only now they fell and Seamus wiped them away. “I didn’t…” I put a hand over my heart, remembering the first time I saw the four of them together in that grimy poolroom and the way my heart had bounded. It had recognized them, even if it took the rest of me time to catch up. “You knew about me for that long? And cared…” I let out a choking laugh. “Oh, I wish I’d met you sooner.”

“You were elusive, lass,” Seamus said. “We could sense you, but we didn’t know your face, your name – nothing. You should have seen how furious it used to make Michael. Gnashing his teeth and setting things on fire. Sometimes he and Mick would spar just to release their tension.

“I think that’s why Michael was a bit short with you when we first met. He was certain you must have sensed us, too. It took him a bit to realize you didn’t know. Or how you’d been duped to think so little of yourself by that harpie of a mother.”

“It wasn’t all her,” I admitted with a sniffle. “Why do you think it took so long? Was it me?”

“Nay, I think you were guarded,” Seamus said. “Perhaps by Oralee herself.”

“And you said that the Fae might have brought my charm.” I touched my necklace. “You received it, right?” He nodded. “How come you and not Patrick, with his Fairy blood? Not that I’m complaining, only curious.”

Seamus rolled his eyes. “Pat might have Fairy blood, but it only makes him more of a pranking imp. He’s pissed off the Fair Folk more than once in his life. You know how many times I’ve had to go to the Seely Court and ask them not to cut off one of his ears or steal his toes?” He shook his head and I laughed. “But they do seem to like me well enough and I wouldn’t be surprised if they knew more than they should of Oralee’s prophecy. Nosy creatures.”

“Will you tell me more?” I asked, suddenly agog to hear more about the O’Sullivans as boys.

“Yes,” Seamus promised. “One day. And one day I will regale you for hours about the misadventures of my cousins and I. Now, to work.”

“Wait, one more question,” I said, laying my hand on his arm. “Why didn’t I experience that moment of recognition?” There was longing in my voice. “I mean, I’m not sure I even quite know what you mean.” *But it sounds wonderful.*

“I think once you fully accept your role in the prophecy and what you can do, Sadie Matheson, Good Witch of Salem, you will.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, chewing my cheek. *I want it now.*

“No,” Seamus said and I blinked in surprise. “No, I’m not, but I believe. Either way, we have to get to lessons. It’s almost two in the afternoon, Sadie.”

“It is not,” I said, my eyes flying to the clock. “Oh my.” We both laughed.

“Michael was right about you, I do need to keep my eyes on you,” Seamus said. “But not too close an eye or I get far more distracted than you.”

We spent a good hour going over the prophecy, Seamus explaining some of the things Skinner might do to try and stop me. He also explained more about the four aspects of magic, which acted like the four points on a compass.

Defensive magic, offensive or battle magic, the physical, which was everything from the mind to healing to the art of spellcasting itself, to wielding the elements.

After that, the rest of the afternoon was spent reading and learning magic of the mind. Including summoning visions, where I sat cross-legged on a cushion in front of the window with my eyes shut and tried to clear my mind. Seamus wanted to see if I could probe into the future and get glimpses of how Skinner might attack.

But all I saw was lightning imprinted on the back of my eyes, only out of order with the actual bolts flicking down from the clouds.

After a quick dinner, we went back to the library and spent time looking up spells and potions. Then, Seamus escorted me to bed and gave me a goodnight kiss.

The next day was still stormy, but I barely noticed as I spent half the day in the library with Seamus again and then the rest with him and Patrick

in the kitchen. With the latter, we concocted spells and traded jokes, our laughter echoed around the cavernous room.

Later, Michael came in and observed for a while, before he started cooking. Mick showed up awhile later, looking disgruntled, but then he grabbed a bag of “crisps” and sat on the counter, heckling his cousins. Michael ignored him, but Patrick fired up at this intrusion on his comedic territory. Soon we were all laughing, even Michael.

After that day, the five of us would spend the mornings together, discussing the prophecy and going over the four aspects of magic. I began to test out wielding the elements, as well.

Soon we settled into a routine. Working together in the mornings, then honing individual skills one-on-one in the afternoons. One day it would be spellbinding with Michael, the next day I’d be with Patrick, exploring the art of potion-making, healing and shaping, or with Seamus, trying to pierce the future and settle my mind.

As for Mick, we did not start on battle magic as I’d thought. Instead, he told me we were going to work on another aspect of defensive magic. Self-defense.

“You want me to learn how to fight?” I’d spluttered at him. Mick had brought me to the training room, which now looked like a cross between warlock dueling grounds and a gym. “Fight-fight? Like punches and kicks? But I’m…”

“You already know how to fight,” Mick had said, wrapping his hands with long strips of white fabric. “Oye, I told you to grab some and follow me.” Hastily, I’d done so. “And yes, part of quick reflexes is getting in tune with your body.” His eyes twinkled as they ran over me. “Fair warnin’, I’m gonna enjoy myself too much during this.”

“Please, that was a given,” I’d retorted, but I was pleased all the same.

I’d never forget how Mick paid me that compliment Halloween night or how his green eyes had lit up looking me over.

“Funny and a quick study,” Mick had rejoined with a laugh.

The first lesson was a lot of cheeky teasing on his behalf as he took his time showing me stances, standing behind me and fixing my stance with playful nudges. But in the following days, the lessons grew more and more serious. Even if it remained just as much sweaty fun as spellbinding. Especially when Mick pinned me down on the mat and decided it was time for a make-out break.

However, as with spellbinding, the lessons with Mick tired me out. At first, I'd run out of breath within an hour. Witch self-defense combined both magic and physical strength. It took me a good week to get my breathing under control and not tap out over and over. Yet as the days passed, soon I was hanging in there and advancing quickly to the next lesson.

It was the same with all the magic I was learning, (save for Seeing, where I kept getting the damn lightning strikes and had no idea if it was a vision or if we were in for more stormy weather), I was progressing by leaps and bounds that delighted all of us. Dinners became mini-celebrations.

After two solid weeks of training with Mick, I was not surprised to see a hint of definition in my arms when I stepped out of the shower. I was still my curvy self, (if anything, a bit curvier with Michael's hearty cooking) but my muscles, magical and physical, were starting to show.

Going down to dinner that night, I paused outside the door and peeked in. Playing with the crystal heart on my chest, I watched as Patrick said something inappropriate and Mick burst into laughter. Seamus was reading a book and ostensibly ignoring them, but his eyes flicked up and a smile curved into one cheek. Michael said something back, then a lively debate began.

I couldn't imagine my life without them anymore. Seamus had said the four aspects of magic would guide me like a compass. But secretly I thought they were my compass, the four points of a star that balanced and completed me. Each of them filled my heart to the brim in a way I never thought possible.

While I still hadn't experienced that profound moment Seamus had spoken of, I fell a bit harder each day. And I knew it was the same for them. More than once, with all of them, I'd caught them gazing at me and not paying a bit of attention to the lesson at hand.

However, by some unspoken agreement, we'd put intimacy on hold while I trained. That, and I'd fallen asleep more than once during lessons, waking up in one of my guys' arms as they carried me upstairs and tucked me in with a kiss.

Tonight, though, for the first time, I wasn't exhausted and ready for bed. I was exhilarated. Today, I'd worked with all four of them and all of them had been impressed by my progress.

As though hearing my thoughts, Seamus spoke up, “Sadie will make short work of Skinner.”

“Aye, that she will, our fierce warrior queen,” Mick said, raising his tankard in salute. “You should have seen our girl send me flying with one blow today. She’s as strong as a dragoness now. Given time, she’ll be greater than the goddesses of the seas and moon combined.”

“Wish she’d take a shorter shower, though,” Michael grumbled. “Taking her damn time, daydreaming up there.”

“You’d know something about that, wouldn’t you, Mike?” Patrick asked slyly.

I stifled a laugh as Mick and Seamus roared, while Michael’s expression became sheepish. About to go in and join the fun, my phone vibrated in my pocket and I stepped away.

I expected it to be Belinda, as we’d chatted a few times and she’d told me Samwise was doing well, though he missed me. I’d also clarified what was going on with the prophecy. And Belinda, best of best friends in the world, had declared she wasn’t surprised at all.

“The Good Witch of Salem, Sadie, of course that’s you,” she’d said, almost casually, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. *“I’m so honored to know you. Don’t worry about a thing and train hard. And I can’t wait to meet the guys.”*

When I pulled out my phone, it wasn’t Belinda’s name flashing. It was Delia’s.

“Yikes,” I muttered. I’d been expecting this, although not tonight of all nights.

“Sadie Matheson, are you out there eavesdropping, you imp?” Michael suddenly roared and I jumped. I held a finger to my lips as he and Mick stuck their heads out the door.

“What, mother?” I asked, not happy about having dinner interrupted.

“Sadie, oh my dear,” my mother said and my blood went cold. I’d never heard her sound like this, so shaken and unsure. “Thank goodness, oh of all things…”

“What’s wrong?” I asked, turning away from the boys. “Is it Grandmom?”

“No, no,” my mother dithered. She never dithered.

“Something’s wrong,” I said in a sharp voice that surprised myself. “Tell me.”

“You need to come home,” she said and I gripped the phone. “Something terrible has happened in Salem.”

CHAPTER 15

Debates broke out as soon as I said I had to go to Salem. Whether I should go, who should go with me, and that nonsense. Ignoring it, stomach filled with dread as I replayed my mother's words, I wondered if the ceaseless storming had been a bad omen. One right under my nose.

Closing my eyes, shutting out the anxious brogues around me, I let my senses expand.

A waxing moon turned in the sky, pulsing and shimmering. Then I realized it wasn't the moon, but my heart crystal, throwing off light and scattering through the ether like stars. Suddenly, a shadow snaked out of the ground and swallowed it whole.

My eyes flew open.

"Patrick," I said.

Michael broke off mid-sentence. "Pat?"

"Me?" Pat asked, grinning, but his eyes were worried. "Not Mick?"

"Yes," I touched my throat, "it should be you. I know it, somehow."

"Trusting your instincts," Seamus said, clapping a hand on my shoulder. "Pat, you go."

The two of us went to the foyer, Patrick pulling on a cloak, while I had a jacket. Holding out his hands, I stepped into Patrick's embrace and he asked in a whisper, "Where to?"

"The shop," I said, my stomach knotting at what I would find.

The manor spun away and I closed my eyes, holding on to Patrick tightly. His soft gasp when we stopped made me keep my eyes shut a

second longer. An acrid smell met my nose as I raised my head and coughed on billowing smoke. Slowly, I opened my eyes and let out a cry.

"Oh, lass," Patrick murmured.

At first, I thought we'd wound up in the wrong place. But then I saw the sign, sticking out of a pile of rubble, half burned, the witch on her broomstick unharmed, but the words gone.

As was *The Witch's Keep* and everything inside.

"My shop," I said, staring around at the skeletal, smoking ruins.

"Sadie," Patrick said, as I stepped forward, unable to reconcile that these piles of ash were the walls I'd known and decorated. Or the trinkets I'd once tried to sell. My books and belongings.

"Sometimes, in bad storms, there's electrical problems," I said through numb lips. "I tried to protect the building, but it was pretty old." I pulled in a shaking breath and Patrick's arms came around me, pulling me backward into him. "I can't believe this…"

If only I wasn't such a crappy witch, surged up.

"This is not your fault," Patrick whispered in my ear.

I let him hold me for several more moments, then I patted his arms and slipped free. Walking in, I saw with a watery laugh that great-grandmother's tablecloth had survived, though it was smoking at the edges. Reaching out, I picked it up and folded it over my arm.

"Huh," Patrick said, coming forward and fingering it. "Old magic is woven into this, generations of it." His eyes narrowed. "That's quite a precious heirloom."

"I know, it was my great-grandmother's and hers before that. So on and so forth. I'm not surprised it made it, although I'll have to fix the edges." I sighed. "Or I could buy a new tablecloth."

"This isn't a tablecloth," Patrick said, his brown eyes lighting up for a moment as he looked down at me in the driving rain. "You've been using *this* as a tablecloth? Ingenious."

"Yes, I have," I said with a genuine laugh, glad Patrick was here.

"But, lass, this is Callista's cloak. Callista Matheson. I recognize it." Patrick held up a corner. "Magical objects are my expertise. And I researched what Matheson heirlooms might come in handy. This was one of them. I can't believe you have it."

"*What*?" I asked, my fingers stroking across it. "I thought that was long lost... Callista was the first of my line, she was one of the most powerful

Matheson witches of all time."

"Yes, till you." Patrick's smile was proud and I flushed with pleasure. "More than that, though, this cloak – whatever burned it was no ordinary fire. It's humming with power; can you feel it?" He placed the folds of it in my hand and a shock went through me. "It's still sensing danger…"

"Maybe we should look around," I said, raising my chin and squaring my shoulders. *I'm not the same witch who left here two and a half weeks ago.*

While Patrick walked along the edges, I moved into what was the workroom and sighed as I looked at the shattered glass sparkling among the rubble. It looked like fairy dust.

My beautiful table was gone and I bit my lip hard, suddenly feeling as though I'd betrayed my shop. In fact, it was still burning as I stepped closer and gasped.

"*Patrick*!"

He came running and stopped at my shoulder, staring down and letting out a string of curses. My stomach was knotting again and this time it was in real, raw fear.

On the floor was a perfect pentagram, drawn in ash with a sickle running through it. Flames outlined the sickle, throwing a ghastly light on our faces.

And I knew this was no accident.

Moving closer, Patrick crouched down and studied it. An angry sound escaped him as he straightened and met my eyes. "It's the Rathbone Coven," he said. My ears pulsed as I gripped the old cloak even harder. "Skinner's calling card."

"But it's not even December," I said through numb lips.

"Skinner must have sensed your presence and decided to end his nap early," Patrick said in a disgusted voice. His eyes flicked back to the symbol and his face twisted. I'd never seen him so angry, although I also saw worry there as he gazed back at me. "Dammit, Seamus was right, the bastard did have precautions. He's here to ensure you don't foil his plans."

"The Purging could begin any day?" I asked, hugging the cloak tighter. "No, no, we should have had *weeks*, I'm not ready. I can't do this. Why did Oralee pick me?"

"Sadie, no, don't give in to fear. Oralee knew what she was doing," Patrick said, striding over and cupping my face. "Everything is going to be

alright."

"My life's work is gone," I said in a choked voice. "Destroyed by him in the blink of an eye. How can anything be alright?" Eyes closing, I murmured, "I can't believe this is happening."

"*Sadie*. Look at me," Patrick said in a stern voice, sounding like Michael for a second. Reluctantly, I did so. "I promise you, we will fix this, but right now we have more pressing concerns. You need to snap out of it, lass. Come."

He pulled me from the ruins, his cloak billowing around us. On the sidewalk, he stopped, taking great-grandmother's cloak from me and snapping it out. Instantly, steam rose from it and the frayed edges softened.

"It'll have to do," he said, as he snapped his finger and a star-shaped clasp appeared in his fingers. Quickly he buttoned it around my throat and I instantly felt warmer. "Might as well use ol'Granny Callista's protective cloak, eh? Keep this on you at all times from now on."

I nodded. Patrick was full of crackling efficiency and his face was grave.

"We've precious little time," he said, leading us through the dark streets of Salem, smelling of rain, wet pavement and ocean. "And much to do. If Skinner has awakened and, by the looks of it, has figured out who you are, we have to train you to fight. We'll have to skip all the eye of newt stuff and the rest of the potion work I had planned." He glanced at me and gave me a small smile. "Good thing you put your foot down and brought me along."

"Where are we going now?" I asked, trying to keep up with him.

"We need ingredients," Patrick explained. "Like I said, you're going straight to warfare training, learning to battle with a wand."

"I don't even have a wand," I exclaimed.

Patrick winked down at me. "We're about to take care of that." He stopped in front of a storefront I knew well, but before I could say a word, we'd stepped inside and Patrick had pulled back his hood. "Hello? Lady Belaba?"

Treysi swept aside a curtain, stepping out and frowning at Patrick. "You again! The sign said closed, boy. Want to spend the night as a toad? Or a cricket? You pick."

"Uh, listen, I know, but we're in need of something from your shop," Patrick said, trying to smile at her. "Sadie, tell her."

Raising an eyebrow, Treysi looked from Patrick to me. “Sadie?” she asked, astounded.

“Hi, Treysi, so sorry to bother you,” I said.

Moving forward, Treysi took my hands and looked me over. “Do not be, we’ve missed you.” She studied me and smiled. “You’ve blossomed, young lady. So, how can I help?”

“We need sand from the Rainbow Mountains of Peru,” Patrick said.

Squeezing my hands, Treysi stepped back and held out a hand. A small bottle filled with sparkling, multicolored swirls appeared on her palm. “This enough?”

“More than enough, thank you,” Patrick said in a tone of relief. “We must dash.”

Treysi glanced between us and her lips set. “Dark portents mutter on the air and endless black skies…” A shudder ran over her. “Something is coming, isn’t it?”

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” I said.

She gave me a surprised look, then smiled. “I believe you, Sadie Matheson. I always sensed there was something special about you.” Treysi tipped up my chin with a finger and said, “Blessed be, my child. I feel better already.” Then she wouldn’t accept any kind of payment.

Treysi’s words heartened me as we stepped back into the storm. From there, we went to Quill, getting ambrosia and moon dew from him. The tall, dark-haired man gave me a wink as Patrick took the ingredients and then wiggled his eyebrows in appreciation. Like Treysi, he refused to charge us and gave me a kiss on the cheek before we left.

At Fawn’s flower shop, the soft-voiced girl hastened to get Patrick the plants he needed. Everything from rose petals to a branch of Rowan to pine needles and one perfect gold leaf from an Oak tree. She shivered as she wrapped up our packages and asked, “Can’t you feel the rising storm?” Shaking her dark head, she said, “I fear the worst is yet to come.”

Reaching out, I squeezed her hands. “Fawn, it’s always darkest before the dawn.” She chuckled and I blinked, realizing I’d rhymed. “It will be okay.”

“You’re always so sweet, Sadie,” Fawn said, then she smiled. “Somehow, I do feel better. Thank you for that.”

Each shop reminded me why I was doing this. And each friend in Salem refused to take any kind of payment. Though they were not all Seers like

Treysi, some innate sense warned them danger was on the air and they looked to me to stop it in its tracks.

The final shop we visited was Deloise DuGraye, who was scowling at the sky through her door when we arrived. She blinked at us in surprise and then waved us inside.

“I’ve been expecting you,” she said, pulling out a silvery chain from her pocket. “I might be a hell of a hexer, but when it comes to spellbinding, few have me beat. Although, you might change that, eh, Sadie?”

I blinked at her in surprise. “How did you…?”

“Treysi isn’t the only one who gets visions. Few hours ago, a chill went over me and I saw a crack of lightning that boded no good. Heard footsteps echoing down the streets of Salem...” Deloise shivered. “But I also saw your face, girlie, and I knew what you needed.”

“Thank you, Deloise,” I said, reaching down to embrace her.

She gave me a kiss on the forehead and whispered, “Blessed be, Good Witch.” Louder, she said, “And you, young rapscallion of an O’Sullivan, you take care of her heart.” Patrick jumped as she smiled at him diabolically, her eyes dancing with fire. “Or I’ll take care of yours.”

For the first time since I’d met him, Patrick was floored. Laughing, Deloise ushered us from the shop and closed the door with a bang.

“I think I just saw me life flash before my eyes,” Patrick said weakly.

“Deloise was a man-eater in her day,” I said. “You better listen to her.”

“By man-eater, do you mean… What do you mean?” I smiled at him and he blanched. “Sadie.”

“I’m teasing you,” I said, stepping close. “Deloise wouldn’t hurt a fly. She’s just overprotective.”

Patrick rubbed the back of his neck. “They all are. I haven’t gotten this many threatening looks since the last time I was in the Seely Court.” Shaking his head, he checked over our various bags and nodded. “Alright, lass, let’s go home.”

His arms wrapped around me and we whirled through the night, landing in the kitchen. Michael was sitting on the counter, waiting for us, his hair messy as though he’d been raking his hands through it and his jaw clenched.

When we appeared, he hopped down and pulled us both into a hug. “Seamus got a flash of what you two found,” Michael said as he let us go.

“The burning sickle.” His fingers brushed my cheek. “And your shop. Oh, lass, I’m so sorry.”

“We’ll rebuild and it will be better than ever,” I said with more confidence than I felt.

“Where are the others?” Patrick asked, going to put down the bags. “We got everything, but we need to get started. It might take all night.”

“Not here,” Michael ordered. “Library.”

We followed him and the wind screamed around the house, rattling the windows, and the lamps flickered. Patrick and Michael looked at each other, before walking faster.

Seamus and Mick had shoved aside a table in front of the window and rolled back a rug. A circle was drawn on the floor, candles lined up at intervals around it. Within it was a four-pointed star and a circle of daisy petals.

The two men ran over and embraced me at the same time, apologizing for my shop and searching my face, ensuring I wasn’t hurt.

“I’m good, too, thanks for asking,” Patrick added sarcastically.

Mick reached out and got Patrick in a headlock, letting me go to ruffle his cousin’s hair. “Aye, I’m even glad to see your mental arse. Good job gathering the ingredients and keeping our girl safe.”

Seamus was going through the bags, lining up everything on the table. He paused when he got to the bag from *Valhalla Bakery* and held it up. “What is this? Did we need something from a bakery?” He pulled over a book with the other hand. “I don’t recall…”

“Nah, thought we might like a bite,” Patrick said.

Everyone laughed and Mick let Patrick go. “Don’t ever change,” Mick told him.

Seamus handed me a cinnamon bun and I then watched as they got everything ready. Mick lit the candles, while Seamus pored over our *Libris Ides,* explaining it held specific instructions for my wand. Then, we gathered together where Patrick and Michael were preparing the sand.

Seamus had taken the branch of Rowan, smoothing it down so that it had no offshoots. Then he tossed it into the air, where it hovered just above our heads.

“Sadie, watch,” Patrick said, opening the bottle and dumping the contents into his palm. Raising it up, he blew it away and I watched as they sparkled through the air. Patrick moved his hands slowly and they coalesced

into a spinning ball, swirling around the branch. Then it stretched out into a cylinder, before coating every inch of the branch.

“Bit shorter, I think,” Michael said. “Sadie, here, hold up your hand.”

I moved closer and Patrick shortened it by an inch. When I nodded, Michael moved forward and held up his hand to his mouth. Cupping his fingers in a circle, he blew through it and fire leapt free. I stumbled back, watching as Patrick’s hair began to move as he held the sand in place with the air and Michael’s fire caused it to become glass.

“Oh,” I said, watching as a beautiful glass object formed, melded to the Rowan branch. It sparkled like a crystal held up to sunlight, throwing rainbows and swirls of light across the room.

“The first part of your wand, milady,” Patrick said with a wink.

When Michael stepped back, Patrick kept it going awhile longer and Mick ran over, summoning a ball of water out of thin air. Steam erupted as the wand was plunged in.

Mick stepped forward and held out his hand, where the wand fell into it. Bowing, he handed it to me and my fingers moved along the wavy glass, realizing it was harder than a diamond. The power of the Rowan branch hummed underneath it, called to protect and serve.

“Thank you,” I said, marveling at it.

“We’re not done yet,” Mick said.

From there, Seamus worked with the ingredients Fawn, Quill and others had given us, slipping them inside of the wand. There was a handy notch at the bottom, which could open and close.

“While a wand is powerful on its own, there’s nothing like potions, especially leaf of Oak and various items from Salem to give your magic an extra kick,” he explained, pouring it in.

After that, the men added a few more things here and there, then glanced at each other, before all their eyes landed on me. The wand was laying on the table in the center of us.

“One more thing before the final ingredient. What should be your charm?” Michael asked.

“My charm?” I asked nervously, fingering the heart.

“Atop a witch’s wand, there’s usually an ornament. Most have a crystal of some kind, usually an orb, or a star,” Seamus explained. “Whatever you choose, choose for you, Sadie. Not anyone else.”

“Not even us,” Michael said.

“Oh,” I murmured, casting my mind about for something. A heart was my first thought, but I wanted something that would show Rowland Skinner exactly who he was dealing with trying to bring about the Purging and endless night. Something that hearkened good magic.

Light.

The sun? No, not enough. The stars? The moon?

An image appeared in my mind and I smiled. “Yes, that’s it.”

Patrick held out his hands, a sketchbook appearing in one and a pencil in the other.

I took them, and sat down to sketch. The image burned behind my eyelids, demanding to be drawn. I’d never been much of an artist, but it was like the pencil was being pulled by something greater than I. When I finished, I held it up and they nodded.

It was an ornate crescent moon, grinning into a serious-faced sun with fiery rays. The moon was silver, while the sun was gold. I went to hand it to Patrick and he shook his head.

“You know enough about shaping to pull it from the page, Sadie. You can do it.”

Placing it down on the table, I hovered my hand over it and the lines crackled with power before white light burst out of them and I *pulled*. There was a flash and when I’d blinked it away, the charm was laying on top of the page, even more beautiful than I’d imagined, with violet jewels set into it. Picking it up, in one hand, I held the wand in the other.

“Come into the star,” Mick said, leading me over.

I stepped in and they took their places at the four corners. Each of them pulled out a knife and I winced as they pierced their palms, letting their blood drip onto the lines. My hair rose up in a swirl around me as energy and wind crackled through the room. A piece of red hair fluttered in front of me, then a strand pulled free and wrapped around the wand like copper wire. At the same time, the blood magic ran down the lines of the stars and light leaped up.

“Call for Deloise’s chain and bind the wand,” Michael cried, sounding far away.

Holding out the handle horizontal, I placed my charm at the top and summoned the chain to bind it. It snaked through the air, wrapping around the wand and charm, which leapt from my fingers to hover in front of me.

As the chain whispered around it, I saw water weave around it, then air, earth and finally, a flash of fire. There was a roar and the lines of the star went white-hot, light leaping up from them, and then it stopped.

Slowly, my hair settled on my shoulders and I watched as the wand spun in the air in front of me, fully formed and beautiful, but with an edge of power that almost intimidated me.

“Will it work?” I wondered out loud.

“Try it,” Patrick urged at once and the others joined in.

Reaching out, my fingers touched the wand and the next second, I was in the air, flying.

CHAPTER 16

Once I managed to get down off the ceiling, which took longer than it should and had them smothering laughter, the guys brought me to the training room. It was now fully decked out as a dueling ground, with actual shifting landscapes. Rocks floated through the air and cliffs rumbled into place around the edges.

"Ha," I said, trying to keep breathing and not pass out. "Guess we're at the fun stuff now." The wand trembled in my hand, eager for action, and I accidentally sent off a spiral of magic that reduced one of the boulders to nothing but dust.

"Remember spellbinding?" Michael said. "Wands tap into your deepest reserves of magic, so you need to be careful not to expel too much. But remember, they are built for offensive magic, so, uh, give yourself time to fully comprehend this lesson."

For the next hour, they had me use the wand to control the four elements. Water and air was more or less okay, I was an Aquarius in Gemini rising, but earth and fire were difficult.

Earth, I kept cracking the ground and knocking us all on our asses, forcing Seamus to repair the floor again and again. Fire, I had the guys ducking out of the way and yelping as meteors streaked around the room.

Sometimes it felt like the wand was controlling me, not the other way around.

Seamus caught on to that first. "You are starting to sense your true power, Sadie, and part of you is struggling with it. But it is not outside of you, you control it."

Even knowing that, as we moved onto balancing spellbinding against wandwork, I kept cracking the walls, floor, and sending off spurts of flame. Once, I set Mick on fire and he had to throw up a wall of water to douse himself. But he merely laughed as I abjectly apologized.

“Don’t worry, you know about the sword of the gods. Not the first time I’ve been on fire.”

If I thought spellbinding on my own was hard, with a wand, it was almost impossible to control. It wanted to fight, to throw off power and to hell with anything else, especially spellbinding. It threw off my defensive skills and only after the fortieth backlash, where I was picking myself up from the other side of the room, Patrick rushing over, that I realized why.

I was terrified and my power was exploding out of me in response to that.

Though it was past midnight and we had much to do, I asked them for a short break. Sitting down on the floor, cupping the wand in my upturned palms, I closed my eyes and settled in.

Seamus had been teaching me breath control and meditation to help me focus. After several minutes, I was calmer and the fear was starting to dissipate. When I opened my eyes, I saw that the guys had sat in a circle around me. Seamus grinned, his eyes opening, and he nodded at me.

I stood up. “I’m ready for the next lesson.”

“Ha,” Mick said, then he let out a roar. “Let’s dig in to real battle magic.” He made a slicing motion and a giant sword appeared in his hand. “Let’s get to it, then, princess!”

“Woah! Am I getting a giant sword?” I asked.

Patrick shook his head. “Nah, Mick just watches too much anime.”

After Mick had calmed down, he stood by my side while the other three faced off against us. I’d thought they’d just attack, but Mick took time to explain how to wield the wand, how I needed to be conscious of spellbinding, yes, and not wasting energy, but also of not holding back. Here, I would be releasing my unique powers – shaping, enchanting and fighting.

“This is when your eye and hand should be one,” Mick concluded. “It’s why we spent so much time fooling around on the mat and working on your fighting skills. You’ll be reacting and firing back. Trust yourself and do what you need to do. I’ll offer suggestions, but they’re just that.”

He corrected my grip again, then glanced over at his cousins. Patrick stepped forward and grinned, his eyes on me. I thought about everything I'd learned and squared my shoulders.

Dust devils suddenly flew across the floor and I dissipated them with one sweep. Suddenly, there was a sound behind me and I turned to see a ten-foot one bearing down on me. With a squeak, I jabbed the wand at it and fire flew out. Now the tornado was on fire and bearing towards me.

Mick doused it. "Fire is not a bad option, but sometimes it can work against you."

Again, I faced off against Patrick, but now Seamus stepped forward. Dust devils came at me, faster and spinning off shards of glass. I conjured a shield, but then the floor tilted sideways and I went flying. As I went to get up, vines latched around my wand hand and I gasped.

"No," I said, but I did something to make the vines grow faster. They were creeping around my other arm and now I was pinned to the ground. They were covering me. "Ugh, can't get free."

"Mick, help her," Seamus yelled.

"No, let her figure it out," Mick barked at him, but I heard worry in his voice.

The vines were almost at my throat and I could barely move. If only I could cut through them – *that's it!* Heat blazed through the wand and my hand was freed as I yanked it upwards, the wand now a curved sword. Easily, I sliced the other ones and turned to face the guys, panting.

"Yes!" Patrick shouted. "Now that was shaping."

"Way to think under pressure," Mick said. "Sometimes simple is best."

Emboldened by that small victory, I faced off against Patrick and Seamus again. Fire and water exploded out of my wand, now back to its original shape, as I beat them back. I leaped into the air and hovered there to avoid Seamus's power over the earth. Then I countered Patrick's tornados with counter-clockwise ones of my own. In the midst of it, a paper butterfly flashed by me and I lashed out, seeking to destroy it.

The resulting backlash sent me flying into a wall, where I slid down into a heap on the floor. I tasted blood and then the world went black.''

“SADIE?”

Michael’s voice was frantic as he called for me. A cool touch enveloped my skin and I recognized Patrick’s healing hands. My eyes blurred as they opened, focusing on four worried faces.

“Maybe we should stop,” Seamus said.

“No,” I said, gritting my teeth and pushing Patrick away. “I know what I did wrong.”

“It wasn’t fair of me, lass,” Michael said. “I should have known you were caught up in the fighting…”

“It was a good lesson,” I said, getting to my feet and waving away their hands. “I need to be prepared to use offensive and defensive magic.”

“It’s your call,” Michael said slowly, but his eyes were troubled and his mouth curved down.

“We keep going,” I said, marching out into the center.

Mick kept coaching me as I faced off against Patrick, Seamus and Michael. Whirling around, I was spellbinding and fighting back, sending out lashes of fire, streams of ice and even once, a screaming dragon with three heads. With that, it took the guys five minutes to fend off and spellbind.

Night turned into day. By dawn, I was adept enough with the wand to fight all four of them at once. But when Michael called for us to stop, I didn’t argue. I was exhausted. Part of me wanted to keep fighting, but I knew I needed rest.

We gathered in a circle in the center of the room, the early light filtering through the smoke wafting through the room and illuminating the broken pieces of rubble around us.

“What now?” Mick asked.

“Sleep,” Michael said. “At least a few hours of it for you and me, Mick. Then, we need to go find out more information.” His jaw clenched. “Why Skinner woke early, where he is and what this means for the prophecy…”

“Why just you two?” Patrick demanded.

“Mick can fight his way out of anything and next to Seamus, I know the most about the prophecy,” Michael said. “I’m also the oldest, so I should be the one to go. Plus, you two have a far more important job. Protecting Sadie.”

“Think she can take care of herself,” Seamus said with a grin.

“Either way, she doesn’t leave your sight, got it?” Michael ordered. “Now, *bed*.”

“Hey,” I said and they all stopped. “The sun rose… The storms have stopped.”

“You’re right, I didn’t even notice,” Seamus said, staring out the window.

“That’s odd,” Michael said. “I would have thought… Never mind. Bed.”

As we left the training room, the sunlight filtering in was blood-red and I shuddered. Michael and Mick went off to shower, nap and go off into the day.

Both of them embraced me quickly, kissing my forehead and squeezing my hands. Then they clapped their cousins on the shoulders. I watched the two go, trying not to wonder if this was the last time I would ever see them.

Seamus offered to stay in my room while I showered, so Patrick could clean up as well. Filled with a nervous restlessness, I spent a good hour under the water, trying not to think about the days ahead. Or the pages dripping black ink in the *Libris Ides.*

I took so long that when I’d gotten back, both of them had showered and were dozing off in comfortable armchairs they’d summoned on either end of my bed.

I was wearing an old, long-sleeved flannel shirt, boy shorts and nothing else. It was oversized and comfortable, something I wore when I was sick or feeling down. Getting into bed, I shivered between the sheets, my eyes falling shut instantly, but my sleep was restless.

Trials and Hunts will commence, the likes of which have never been seen.

Screams, smoke, cracking earth… Demons in the sky…

Folk of magic will suffer endless persecutions.

Swinging nooses, burning trees, more screaming and blood running like rivers.

And none but Skinner’s own shall walk free. As they glut their appetite for power, they will destroy the balance between good and evil. Darkness will reign evermore as good magic dies…

Two gloved hands capturing a sparkle of light and crushing it into nothingness.

Lest the Darkest of Warlocks is undone by the Brightest of Hearts, the Daughter of Wicca and Light, hear me now, the Purging will come to pass.

Words spun behind my eyes, burning in flamescript. Then the Libris Ides was hovering between my hands, the pages streaming away into the night.

Until I was left with nothing but the cover, which crumpled to ash.

"No!" I cried out and sat up, a hand on my heart.

My eyes shot to the windows, expecting to see black skies, but all I saw were dull, gray thunderheads. The sun was gone and dread rose, thick and coppery into my throat.

"Huh? What time is it?" Patrick's sleepy voice asked.

"Sadie, are you alright?" Seamus's voice was closer and I sensed him climb onto the bed. I shook my head, rocking back and forth, with my head on my knees. I was gripping my hair and trying to shake the terrible certainty that the Purging would come to pass.

"And it will be my fault," I whispered.

I'm going to fail.

"What will be your fault?" Patrick asked, climbing in on the other side.

Chest rising and falling, I shook my head, not wanting to tell them how scared I was. They were O'Sullivans, sure of their gifts, hell, sure of everything. And foolishly sure of me. I couldn't tell them I was starting to have a mental breakdown at the critical moment.

"You'll feel better once it's off your chest," Patrick wheedled.

"Come on, Sadie, you can tell us anything. Especially us two," Seamus said, nudging my arm.

"I'm scared," I gasped and hot tears rushed free. "Everyone is counting on me and I'm *me*… They know, somehow, they know Salem is in danger and they think I can protect them. But, what… How can I do it?" I shook my head. "I thought I would have so much more time to get better. Two and a half weeks of training?" I let out a bitter laugh. "This guy's been asleep for millions of weeks."

"Actually, it's just over sixteen thousand," Seamus said.

"Not helping," Patrick hissed. "Sadie, you're thinking too much about the four aspects and elements, which you've got almost spot on at this point. Right, Seamus?"

"Yes, I was telling Michael earlier that I wondered how much left we had to teach you."

“But remember, too, lass, the last lines. *The Good Witch of Salem. An unlikely choice mayhap, but one of pure heart and spirit. Only the brightest heart can burn out the endless night.*”

“Those are the most important,” Seamus whispered. “I know it.”

“But what does that even mean? How am I pure? I’m…” I couldn’t face them.

“Sadie, stop, do not go into that dark place of your heart,” Seamus said, pulling one of my hands away from my head and gripping it. “Think of what you’ve done. How much you’ve learned. No wonder why Skinner awoke now. It’s legendary in and of itself.”

“Lass, more than your magic, it was how you started believing in yourself that took me breath away, honest as a bob’s uncle,” Patrick said, taking my other hand. “It’s not so much you’re different, but you’re more, *you*. Like Lady Belaba said. You’ve blossomed.”

I raised my head and looked between them. “You think I can do this?”

“You know it doesn’t matter what we think,” Seamus said. “You reminded me of that the other day.” He pressed a kiss to my hand. “You know you’re one beautiful, badass witch.”

Patrick was rubbing circles on my other hand with his thumbs. “You know you can do this.”

“You’re worn out and you need us to work out your kinks, I think,” Seamus said. His hands went around my waist and he twisted me so that I was in his lap, his hands on my shoulders.

Meanwhile, Patrick had scooted down and pulled my feet into his lap. My eyes fluttered closed at the dual sensation of strong, rough fingers kneading my shoulders and feet. Tension and worry melted away as both of them expertly found every tight muscle and loosened it.

Then Seamus’s hands were drifting down my arms, while Patrick was starting to work his way up my calves. It was delectable, sending electricity dancing up my skin.

Opening my eyes, I met Patrick’s gaze and a hot pulse of need went through me. Without meaning to, I squirmed against Seamus and something rigid poked into my back.

“I think *we* know what you need,” Seamus murmured in my ear, his teeth finding the outer shell. At the same time, Patrick lifted my leg, kissing my ankle. Mouth dry, I gripped Seamus’s hard thighs, suddenly very ready to be comforted in all sorts of ways by these two O’Sullivans.

CHAPTER 17

Seamus's lips were firm, but gentle, while Patrick's were wild, yet sweet. The combination of them together had my nerves twisting into bundles of pleasure. Fire raced under my skin and danced through my blood, all pointing to that aching spot between my legs.

While Seamus found a spot on my neck to tease with his teeth, Patrick was pulling off his shirt and my eyes went wide. He had a brilliantly blue tattoo on one shoulder, an ancient Celtic symbol. On the other arm was a black shoulder sleeve of birds in flight. I watched as his hard muscles rippled as he crawled up towards me, peppering kisses as he went and fanning the flames higher with his molten chocolate eyes.

"Is this okay?" he asked, hovering over me. I nodded, breathless. Patrick was still smirking, but it deepened as he reached for the buttons of my shirt. "What about this?"

"She's speechless," Seamus murmured. "It's adorable."

Patrick's hand left my shirt and I wanted to cry out. "In that case, I think she needs more attention." Moving down, he kissed the inside of my thigh and I moaned, arching back into Seamus.

My head had fallen onto his shoulder and I met his gray eyes. Heat flashed between us and then Seamus was kissing in a way that told me he'd held back before. Oh, he was starving for this.

Meanwhile, hands were exploring my body. I wasn't sure who belonged to who, but suddenly my shoulder was bare and Patrick's lips were on it. Gasping, I broke away from Seamus. But before I could catch my breath, Patrick's lips crashed against mine.

Seamus was unbuttoning my shirt, pressing kisses as he went along. I whimpered into Patrick's mouth, overcome with the contesting sensations. And this was just from kissing. My brain went into overload trying to imagine anything else.

My shirt was completely unbuttoned, but my breasts were still covered. Seamus ran a finger up my stomach, between my breasts and to the hollow of my throat. I shivered, breaking away from Patrick, needing oxygen.

They were both regarding me with the same fervent, hungry look. And suddenly there were mouths everywhere.

Twisting and turning, I kissed one, then the other. At some point, my shirt fell open and a tongue swept around a sensitive nipple. Shaking, Seamus pulled away from kissing me with a diabolical grin.

He joined Patrick, both of them taking my breasts into their mouths and I cried out their names. My fingers reached overhead and scrabbled against the headboard. Curving my spine, I offered myself to them eagerly.

In fact, I was about to come, but then they slowed and I let out a curse.

Patrick's face hovered over mine, then his eyes slid sideways. "Is she wet?"

Eyes wide as I panted, I heard Seamus say, "Let me check." Broad fingers swept over my panties and my hips jerked. They both chuckled in a deep dark way. "That's a yes."

"You want more?" Patrick asked, suddenly grabbing my wrists in one hand as he moved higher up the bed. "Or should we keep teasing you? Should we get you to beg?"

"More," I gasped, trying to find some release. But Seamus had my hips pinned and I couldn't move. "I can't take it, please, *please.* I'm already begging…"

Suddenly, my panties vanished and a finger ran up my seam. I almost wept with relief. When I looked down, I saw that Seamus was spreading my legs wide. Patrick caught one ankle in his hand and pressed a kiss to it. At the same time, Seamus now gripped the base of my thighs.

"What do you want?" Seamus challenged, his eyes on me.

"Fingers, tongue, anything," I begged.

"Hm," Seamus said, his fingers dancing over my outer folds and I tried to move against them. But Patrick kept me locked in place. Agile as he was, he still managed to lean down and take a nipple in his mouth.

“Oh, oh, ah, I-*yes,*” I moaned, as a finger brushed inside of me. “Don’t stop!”

Seamus continued to tease me, though, drawing out the pleasure in ways that made me think these O’Sullivans were torture artists as well as warlocks. Patrick had yanked the leg he was holding closer as he moved his mouth to the other breast.

Seamus shifted on the bed and suddenly an expert tongue was savoring my center. It was as though I was an exquisite dessert and each lick needed to be momentous.

Patrick let go of my hands, allowing me to run my fingers into his silky blond locks and tug on them. But his other hand was caressing my other breast. I was getting close, I was incoherent…

I shattered into a million pieces of pleasure and each one was better than the last. Eyes closed, hands limp, I lay there, absolutely undone by what had just happened.

“You don’t want us to stop just yet, do you now?” Patrick murmured in my ear.

“We have so much more to teach you,” Seamus said.

Forcing my eyes open, I sat up and met their wicked grins with one of my own. Shrugging off my shirt, I crawled forward and pushed them back. Thankfully, this bed was huge, so we could roll around and then some, without having to fear falling off.

A few days ago, I’d managed to sneak away to the library and look up the spell to remove clothing. I did so now, taking off their pants first and shivering at the sizeable bulges in both of their boxers. Patrick went to sit up, but I palmed him and he fell back with a groan.

Leaning over, I slipped my hand inside of Seamus’s boxers, while I caused Patrick’s to vanish. He was gorgeous in his naked glory, his swollen cock ready for my mouth. Eagerly, my lips and hand took him. With Patrick, I went wild, scraping my teeth along the sides and running my fingers along the bottom. But with Seamus, I was an artist, letting my fingers explore and savor the ridges and pulsing veins.

Gasps and groans filled my ears. Just as Patrick was getting close, I slowed and switched to Seamus, tugging his boxers off in one motion. It was a good thing my jaw was warmed up as I took him in my mouth.

As they had pleasured me, I pleasured them and exulted in it. Having two O’Sullivans in bed was whipping a tempest in my soul that needed to

be let loose. I wanted to let the moon's glow kiss my naked skin, to swim in the thrashing seas and to treat my men to boundless satisfaction. Switching between them, I tasted those cocks like a goddess of lust.

Patrick came first, arching up and gripping the bed. After, I went to Seamus, who gripped my hair and tugged on it as I finished him off. When he came, I looked up and noticed Patrick watching us, his eyes dark with sin. It sent a tingle across my skin and I smiled at him.

"Kiss him," Patrick whispered, digging his fingers into the blanket.

I rolled over onto Seamus, enjoying the sensation of his bare skin against mine. He blinked up at me, smiling lazily as we began to kiss. But soon those kisses were frantic and demanding, his hips pushing up into mine. His hard cock brushed against me more than once.

Squirming back, I sat up and lifted my hips above his. His hands found my waist, guiding me down and I gasped, eyes rolling back as he pressed the first few inches of his cock inside of me.

Patrick's hands came around me then, palming my breasts and helping me bounce up and down. His lips moved up and down my neck as I found my rhythm. But then Patrick stopped me, moving my hips in a different way, so that Seamus was completely sheathed inside of me, and I rocked back and forth on his cock. Patrick's lips were on my back as I experimented with this.

It was brushing that desperate, dark nub of pleasure in ways I'd never imagined. However, soon Seamus needed release. With a growl, he began to thrust his hips up. Now that spot was being hit and circled upon. I gasped and Patrick reached around to ground his fingers into my clit.

Now, I was crying out, begging for more as Patrick pulled my hair back and moved me against Seamus. I orgasmed twice, bliss hitting me so hard I thought it would never end. Then Seamus came and warmth rushed through me again.

Gasping, we fell in a tangled heap, kissing and stroking each other. For a while, it was playful and sweet. But all too soon that insistent demand was firing through me and I realized two hard cocks were nudging against me. Suddenly, Patrick drew away and Seamus slid inside me.

He thrust in and out, gentle and slow and then stopped, anchored deep inside of me, stroking my hair. I was about to protest, but fell silent as I felt something tease my ass. I let out a strangled gasp. It was something cool and silky, filling the air with the scent of something sweet.

“Do you want both of us, Sadie?” Patrick asked, in my ear, running his hard cock up and down my now-lubed ass.

Biting my lip, as my walls screamed for release around Seamus’s rigid cock, I reached back and cupped Patrick’s face. Then, I nodded. God help me, I did. I wanted them both. Patrick pressed forward and the sting was almost enough to make me beg him to stop, but as my muscles gave way and loosened, a shaft of pleasure so keen it made my toes curl shot through me. Slowly and carefully, he filled me and then stilled. My body quivered from head to toe, every cell on overdrive when I was filled. I let out a groan and they began to move.

Dear god…so much…

So much skin sliding and slapping, the moans filling the room, the taste of salt and the pleasure building, building, building. Screaming their names. Gasping. Begging as they filled me up.

Nipples flicked. Collarbones nipped. Neck tasted. Cocks thrusting.

I wanted to both draw it out and see how hard I could hit that pleasure point.

When I did, my vision went white. My body shook once, twice, three times as I exploded around those swollen cocks in a hot rush.

Male voices chanted my name and I closed my eyes to savor to sensation as they stiffened inside me, roughly gripping my hips as they came inside me.

Collapsing in a heap, Patrick’s hand on my stomach, his head on my back, my head on Seamus’s chest and Seamus’s arm wrapped around my shoulders, I let out a blissful sigh.

“And here you thought you only deserved one man,” Patrick murmured.

I wanted to reply, but I was so exhausted…so sated and warm. My eyes were closing and before I could answer, I was fast asleep.

CHAPTER 18

Boom!

I was awake and out of bed before my mind could even catch up to what I was doing. As I crossed the room for the door, another crack of thunder came, shaking the house, and I stopped. Instinct told me this was not an ordinary storm.

Winds rose now, howling and clawing across the house. The house swayed and I glanced out the window to see the trees flailing in the wind. Leaves exploded across the windows, torn and thrown into the black night. Yet I heard no rain.

Darting out in the hall, I met the guys, all coming running. Immediately, they chained their arms around me, declaring that they needed to protect me and would figure out what was going on.

However, my eyes were narrowed at a southwestern window at the end of the hall. There was a flicker of light there, a crooked finger beckoning me to my fate. I ducked under Michael and Seamus's linked arms.

"Hey, where do you think you're goin'?" Michael roared.

At the window, I stopped and stared, my fists clenching by my sides. Breath whooshed out of my body and there was a distant hum of fear, but it was swallowed under rage and purpose.

The beautiful trees that lined the property had been reduced to a heap of ash. Like my shop, there was nothing but skeletal remains of what had been. Almost a lively mini-purging, if you had a ghastly sense of humor. The Rathbone calling card was burned into the ground, a mile across every way and a clear challenge to come and play.

As my eyes moved past it, the guys came up behind me and gripped me. I was sure they'd noticed that the devastation was deliberate. A fiery path back to Salem and Skinner.

"I heard he liked to play wi'his food a bit," Patrick grunted.

"Something is moving in the distance," Seamus said and I looked up to see him narrowing his eyes. "In Salem, something is happening." He swallowed. "In the Greenlawn Cemetery."

"It's not the only one disturbed," Michael said.

"But it's illegal to be in a cemetery after dark in Salem," I said automatically. That fact had been burned into my brain as a young resident. I.e. Don't get caught by the police.

All of them chuckled darkly. "'Fraid Skinner doesn't follow the rules of life and death, never mind the common law of the Ordinaries," Patrick said.

"Hold on, it's beginning to move this way," Mick said. "We need to make a plan."

The hour tolled midnight and I stepped back. "This is it. We need to get dressed and go. Take him down before anyone in Salem gets hurt." Silently, I prayed everyone would be hunkering down and casting protections. Not that they would be any good if I didn't succeed–

Shaking my head, I pulled free of the guys and rushed back to my room. Flicking my hands down, I called on the first outfit that came to mind. A pair of black leggings, a leather skirt, and my lucky black and gold top, the one I'd worn for the first day of spellbinding with Michael.

Once my boots were on and I'd tied back my hair into a ponytail, I was about to leave when I saw great-grandmother's cloak on a chair. Snatching it up, I whirled it around me and the air hummed as it repaired itself. The charm at my throat came alive as well.

For a moment, it was like my great-grandmother and the other witches of the Matheson line stood by me. I was meant to get Callista's cloak. They'd sensed their descendant would need it and so each generation poured great power into it. They were trusting me.

I can do this.

Securing my wand on my belt, I marched out and found the guys waiting for me. They were also dressed for battle, all in black and leather. For one delicious moment I was distracted and even grinned a bit, but then there was another crack of thunder.

"I think our host is growing impatient," Patrick said, his lip curling.

“Let’s go,” I said, reaching for them.

Together, we whirled away into the night and landed on a side street in Salem. There was a terrible, waiting hush over the town. I’d never heard it so completely silent. No crickets chirped, no wind scuffled through the leaves and the very sky seemed to press down on us.

For one horrid moment, I wondered if I was too late and the town was full of ghosts.

Seamus knelt down on one knee and pressed a palm flat into the earth. “The people are safe, for now. It seems he saved his parlor tricks for us.” He straightened and nodded to the east. We were now on the other side of Greenlawn. “But I think he has sensed you, Sadie. Nothing moves.”

“Mick?” Michael prompted.

“I’ve run over a hundred scenarios for this night,” Mick said, scratching his chin. “But I don’t think tactics will aid us now. Aye, I think we best march in there with Sadie at the helm and bring ‘im hell in every way we know how.”

“Send him to hell, you mean,” Seamus said.

My fingertips were growing cold and my heart was slamming into my ribcage, but I jerked my head in a nod. I didn’t trust myself to speak. I was trying to come up with a plan, but my thoughts were limp and distracted. And I had a feeling no plan would come to my aid now.

The guys fanned out next to me and we walked down the wet pavement, our boots silent, and the smell of fire grew. Behind it, was a ripe stench, as though the ground had been torn open to the sewers below. One that worsened as we got closer, stinking of the breath of the reaper himself.

Am I going to die? Will the Purging come to pass?

Closing a hand around my charm, I steadied myself. *No, I can do this. I have to do this.*

The houses fell away as we approached the graveyard, occupying a massive swath of land on a part of Salem that jutted out into the ocean. Something tickled in the back of my mind and I slowed. Greenlawn was a newer cemetery. Hadn’t Belinda, who had a fondness for spooks and seances, told me something about it? Greenlawn had been built in the 1800s…

Of course. This isn’t right! He’s at The Old Burying Point.

“Wait,” I said and threw my arms to stop them. Moving forward on my own, I started to say, “I think it’s a trap, we need to–”

“Sadie, watch yourself!” Mick shouted, but it was too late, I’d stepped on a hex, which flashed to life with black magic, and I was transported to Derby Street.

Only it was no longer the Derby Street I knew.

Chest rising and falling, I stared around. Everything was gone, gone as though it had never been. There used to be a patio bar right there, strung over with lights, and then a series of stands selling everything from corn dogs to candy apples.

Now it was all dry, cracked earth.

Taking a few steps forward, I wondered if I should try to find the guys or if this was what had to happen all along. Pulling my cloak closer, I stumbled a bit when a grave loomed up. My eyes swept the landscape and I realized what Skinner had done.

The Old Burying Point was nothing but a small nook near the center of Salem. However, Skinner had transformed the miles around it into a graveyard. A battleground gift.

Where was he? Something moved ahead of me and I moved forward. The ground split and a grave appeared, almost smacking me in the chin. Moving back, I stared at it and shook my head.

Callista Matheson.

A Good Witch Lies Here.

Without thinking, my fingers shot out and gripped the grave. *This shouldn’t have been here*, I thought dazedly. Callista, first of my line, was buried on the other side of the ocean.

“Thought you might like to say hello to a few of your relatives before you joined them.”

A hooded figure had appeared just beyond Callista’s grave, lounging against a tree, and I stepped forward. Head held high, I stared him down and I saw a flash of silvery teeth from the depths of the hood. Instincts screamed at me to be cautious. He liked to play games, this mage.

“Rowland Skinner?” I demanded, hands on my hips. “You can go straight back where you came from.”

He inclined his head and let out a sneering laugh. “Oh, can I? Hmph, imagine my surprise when I realized Oralee’s bright heart was a *Matheson*. Now, that’s something I wouldn’t have guessed. Your line was always famous for being above it all.”

I said nothing, knowing when I was being baited. *Got nothing on Delia. Man, she is such a pain in the ass, maybe more than Skinner. Why do I listen to her?*

The thought almost made me laugh and a smile curved up into my cheeks.

Skinner straightened and his laughter died. “Don’t you smile at me, worthless witch. ‘Tis too late for you and your kind. Your powers have yet to reach their peak.” He sounded savagely pleased. “I’ve foiled the Seer’s prophecy by awakening early. You cannot hope to stop me.” He tilted his head. “If you surrender, perhaps I’ll spare a few of your choosing.”

“So, what, we can sit by and watch the world end?” I asked. “No thanks.”

“Mm, not even for one of those O’Sullivan boys you’re so smitten with?” Skinner asked and my skin grew cold. For a moment, I thought I could hear them calling for me and agony beat against my chest. “Oh, how desperately they hunt for you, Sadie.”

He spat my name like a curse and dark energy rushed through the ground, sending a jolt up my spine. But I held my ground. I wasn’t going to give in. Skinner was a bully, that was all.

Maybe a really strong, old bully, but still a bully.

My fingers drifted to my wand. Skinner saw the movement and for a moment, I thought I saw him stiffen in surprise. “Already?” he whispered. “But I thought…”

“You thought I couldn’t learn how to wield my wand before Yule?” I challenged, emboldened by this small hesitation. “Guess again, moldy.”

I thought Patrick would have appreciated that, and for a moment, I swore I heard his laughter on the wind. Suddenly, I was glad they were far away. In case I failed, maybe they could escape. They were the most powerful warlocks of this age, if anyone could survive…

What would survival mean without you, Sadie? Seamus’s voice whispered in my mind.

I went to grab my wand when Skinner disappeared. “*Bastard*. Come back and fight.”

“I’d rather not,” came a whisper all around me, echoing into the depths of the earth. “But my armies can indulge you.”

Depths that began to shake and I pitched forward. In horror, I watched as earth began to crumble around me and bony fingers scrabbled through

the earth, bursting into the air. Dead things were crawling out of the earth. With a yell, I scrambled back and got to my feet as the earth shook. I tried to stop it, but it was of no use. Instead, in these last precious moments before they broke free I ran forward, trying to find Skinner.

Now, I was in The Burying Point proper, I recognized the winding paths and old trees. Trees that were now gray and dead-looking, their branches bowing to the ground. The graves here were shaking and Skinner was nowhere in sight.

All around, dead witches and warlocks had been freed from their slumber, strips of flesh hanging from their bones and unearthly groans passing from their long-closed lips.

“Seriously?” I muttered.

All of the flamescript hype and this old guy who should have stayed dead didn’t even deign to fight me? He sent in minions? Zombie minions?

“Scared, Skinner?” I challenged, keeping an eye on the slow-moving bodies. Black sparks darted around them, stitching their forms into gruesome shells of what they’d once been. “Stop hiding and face me like a man.”

“Oh, Good Witch, you’re amusing. Are all women so bold in this time? Pity, I would have liked that,” he mused and I made a disgusted face. “Or at least teaching them their place.”

His voice was coming from every direction and I noticed the zombies had stilled. A crinkle ran up my spine. “You’re a coward, just as I thought you’d be,” I spat.

“No, I merely have no interest in wasting my time on the likes of you. Destroy her,” Skinner crowed and suddenly the zombies were *running* at me. Before I had time to react and snatch my wand, I was pinned down. “Fetch her wand, Callista, and take back your cloak.”

My long-dead ancestor snarled in my face, her cloak fanned around me, useless as though it were a mere tablecloth. Punching wildly with my free hand, my knuckles hit her jaw and started to bleed. Something else grabbed my hand. Now, I couldn’t move and I wriggled, screaming.

Spellbinding didn’t work, shaping, elements… These zombies were impenetrable.

How?

Before I could think on it further, more zombies had joined, pinning me into the earth, which trembled and I began to sink into it. Bony fingers were

at my waist and clutching my wand.

Trapped, with the dead swarming me, I was sure I was about to join them.

CHAPTER 19

Callista was going to steal my wand and kill me. The cruelty and sacrilege of using the first witch to kill off her line sent a shockwave of rage through me. Eyes burning, I desperately tried to think of something the guys had taught me, but I couldn't spellbind the zombies, I'd already tried. Skinner had used some kind of magic to animate them I wasn't sure yet how to stop.

As the earth started to swallow me, an old memory rose up in me. I'd gotten myself trapped in a fox hole once at Grandmom's house. As Freya was always far kinder than Delia, instead of laughing when she found me, she'd taught me a simple and rather silly spell to free myself if it happened again.

"You never know when you might need it," Grandmom had said, ruffling my curls.

I couldn't have been more than five and it was probably one of the first spells I performed successfully. It was like a nursery rhyme, wasn't it?

Little Witch, Little Witch
Take a spell to spin
Old gifted, so blessed
Hearken to your kin!
No matter the pickle
Be free as the wind!

Callista and the other witches were thrown back as the air spun around me, lashing with bits of fire and I found myself on my feet again. Internally, I was dazzled that old rhyme worked, but of course it did. Young Sadie had been a pro at getting herself out of pickles, whether it was the hedge, or a

trap left by wily neighborhood boys for poor little animals, or a jar of actual pickles.

I bet it would have worked on that room the O'Sullivans locked me in if I'd thought of it.

"*What?*" Skinner screeched. "You used a ditty to free yourself?" Suddenly he appeared in front of me and thrust back his hood, glaring at me.

I raised an eyebrow. Skinner was tall, but he was rather skinny, with a long face and nose, and darting, rat-like eyes. Dressed in the garb of the 1700s under his cloak, he looked rather ridiculous. His white wig was askew as he regarded me.

"Perhaps I need to swell my ranks," he mused, trying to grin, and failing.

"I was thinking the same thing," I said, pulling my wand free and shattering the web of enchantment Skinner had used to cloak me. At the same moment, I sensed each O'Sullivan as they sensed me. Before they could teleport, I'd already brought them here. "You're out of your league."

"*Sadie,*" echoed Michael and Seamus in tones of fervent relief.

"How rude, trying to keep us from the party, ol'rat-face," Patrick said and the air around me rose in a maelstrom, causing my hair to whip around my face. The ponytail was falling out and I ripped the elastic free, looping it around my wrist.

"You're gonna pay for stealing our girl," Mick promised.

Skinner growled and vanished before us. Again, his voice echoed and the ground shook. More zombies rose up and the smell of rotten flesh filled our noses.

Patrick spun the air, lifting the scent and knocking several back. Mick leaped into the fray, wielding his sword and keeping them back. I went to help when Seamus caught my arm.

"You shouldn't waste your energy, Sadie," Seamus said urgently, his eyes warring with relief and terror. I could see what it had cost them when I'd vanished. His hair was wild and face drawn.

"Seamus is right, that's what Skinner wants," Michael said on the other side, wielding a whip of fire and knocking back the tide of bodies. "I think he fears you and rightly so." He also had a troubled look, but there was a glint of pride in his eyes. "Well done, though, lass."

“I don’t know where he keeps running off to hide,” I said in a tone of frustration.

“Seamus?” Michael asked and the gray-eyed man closed his eyes.

How well he cloaks himself, I heard Seamus’s voice, clear as day.

Seamus? I asked, startled, and his eyes flew open. We stared at each other and then he smiled. *That was you earlier, I heard you.*

“Guys, this isn’t really the time,” Michael said in a tone of wry amusement as he knocked back bodies. Mick landed in front of us, cursing and spinning his sword. “How goes it?”

“It’s going somewhere,” Mick grunted. “Nothing works on these slimy bastards. Battle magic, spellbinding, elements… They keep putting themselves back together.”

“I noticed that too,” I said, as Patrick appeared behind us, closing ranks. “Let me help.”

“No,” Michael grunted, a sheen of sweat on his face. “Save your energy, princess.”

“Take my hand, Sadie,” Seamus said. “Something occurred to me, but I need your help.” While his cousins battled, Seamus closed his eyes again and I sensed him probing the air.

A dark chime rang out in my mind as though our fingers had closed over a loop of web and sent a vibration through the night. We both realized what Skinner had done.

“That’s how he did it,” Seamus said. “And it has one fatal flaw.”

“Of course,” I breathed. “And if we follow it to the center…” In my mind’s eye, I raced along the webs encircling us, each one connected to the zombies lurching and running towards us. But they all led back to… “Skinner.” Eyes flashing to a large tree in the center of the graveyard, I yanked free of Seamus and ran towards it. “Stop hiding! I’m going to make you pay for what you did to Callista and my warlocks.”

Energy speared through the night from my wand, lightning and fire-fly-like creations, destroying Skinner’s illusion. It shook the web he’d created, one that looped through Salem itself, a crisscrossing of living and the dead. I sensed Seamus’s elation as I began to dismantle what we’d discovered. Skinner’s power lay in his careful straddling of those crossroads between life and death. In a way, he was practically a zombie himself and thus, it gave him the ability to reach into the void.

But now that I'd sensed the precariousness of his magic holding him there, I knew I could tip the balance. And send him straight to hell.

Skinner managed to throw up a shield to stem my assault, but he was panting as he straightened. Snapping his fingers, six dark mages suddenly appeared. One was wielding a battle ax, another had double swords, two had black wands, while the other two rose into the air and called for fire. I hesitated, watching the shadows move inside their dark cloaks and wondering who they were.

"Meet my descendants," Skinner answered and they rushed forward.

But Michael was there, knocking all six back, then Mick leaped overhead, dueling the battle-ax warrior and the swordsman at the same time. Seamus and Patrick were behind me, Seamus holding the *Libris Ides,* from which he freed the flamescript and sent it flying around the graveyard. Patrick had summoned an ethereal-looking bow and was shooting bolts of air at the fire mages.

They cleared a path to Skinner and I stepped forward, slamming a foot into the earth and calling forth vines to hold him. He almost escaped, but one snarled around his ankle and I swung my wand like a bat, sending a bolt of light magic directly at his chest.

Overhead, the starless sky lightened and I glanced up, grinning.

Skinner's body sagged and his skin grew tight on his bones for a moment, then he shook himself and sent a blast of dark fire at me. I twisted away, but the fire landed and became hellhounds. As I was about to spellbind them, I sensed the trap disguised within and instead, turned them into phoenixes, which dove at Skinner.

He blasted them away and our eyes met. His tongue darted out and I watched as he wiped away black blood from the corner of his mouth.

Twirling the wand, I called forth three creatures of pure light, tall and graceful as elves. They darted at Skinner, driving him back and keeping him occupied as I walked forward. I'd found the center of his magic and the weak spot of his connections to this plane.

It was in the hole where he'd gouged out his heart.

For a moment, pity overcame me as Skinner fell to his knees in front of me and my creatures surrounded him. To have no heart, nothing but emptiness, worse than the void itself…

"Pathetic," Skinner spat and he threw out a bolt of dark energy.

It hit my heart and I fell to my knees, gasping. My wand clattered to the ground as I wrapped my arms around myself and cried out in anguish. Skinner picked it up and laughed.

“Sadie!”

Voices were calling my name, crying for me, but my eyes were misting and the world was vanishing into a veil of silence. I was falling away, lost and alone.

For a moment, I was nothing but a child again, one who’d strayed too far from home.

Tears tracked down my face. I couldn’t remember anything.

Where was I? How had I gotten here?

It was nothing but misty woods, with dark, menacing trees.

I was alone. All alone. I got to my feet and stared around. So alone, there was no one…

“You’re never alone, you know this, Sadie Matheson. I chose you for your heart, which encompasses all beings, great and small, magical and ordinary.”

Spinning, I saw a woman in white smiling at me. The mist vanished and sunlight poured through the trees, illuminating her. Her eyes were bound with silver cloth and her name jumped to my lips.

“Lady Oralee,” I breathed.

“Tis I,” she said with an impish laugh. “I laid a secret spell on my bloodline, knowing Skinner would use his dirty tricks to try to blind you and steal your power.” She gave a shrug. “He was always very predictable.”

“He has my wand, and oh, the guys,” I said, as the memories returned in a rush. I glanced over my shoulder as though they’d be fighting in the distance. But it was nothing but beautiful hills and woods, stretching to a distant sea and a tower of white stone.

“Skinner has trapped you inside of your darkest fears, Sadie Matheson,” the white witch said and I turned back to her. “But in doing so, he awoke my enchantment. Heed me, though, we have moments. Each of your guardians is about to fall, as are you. You are connected, through bonds of love. Skinner has your wand and he will try to smite you with it. If he succeeds, your guardians die.”

“No,” I burst out. “How could you? That isn’t fair.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Would it be fair for them to live without you? Such a fate would be worse than death. It would drive them into the

madness of despair."

"Do they love because of you, then?" I asked, suddenly furious with her.

"I have no power over love, no one does, Sadie Matheson," the witch snapped back.

"How could you choose me? Me?" I demanded now.

"Choose you? Nay, lass, I *saw* you as you are," Lady Oralee said, her lilt vanishing and her voice growing stern. "I do not bind those men to you with enchantment, they love you because they know your heart and deepest self."

My anger vanished. "Oh, I'm… Lady Oralee, thank you."

"I wanted to meet you," she said. "I understand yours is not an easy task. So, I will tell you this. You know the way to free yourself. Just like with your Matheson nursey rhyme, the answer to defeat Skinner has been there all along."

She was starting to fade and I panicked, wanting her to stay. "Lady Oralee, I…"

"Child, I know," she said and she smiled. "Be good to them. Be good to yourself."

The darkness was rushing back and the light was fading.

"Blessed be, brightest heart of Witchkin," she whispered.

My fingers found the charm at my neck and squeezed it. I thought of Salem, of the people there. From my harping coven to my haughty mother to my gleeful Grandmom.

Belinda, Samwise, Oliver, Fawn and Treysi.

All of the people who were counting on me.

The O'Sullivans.

In my mind's eye, as though from a great distance, I saw them struggling to fight back, desperate to get to me, where I knelt upon the grave dirt with my face in my hands.

And then it shifted. I saw the lost little girl in the woods look up. There, standing in front of her, were the O'Sullivans as boys. Michael, imposing, but with kind eyes and a bandage on his cheek, Mick was short, stocky and scrappy, Seamus a bony, lanky and loveable toothpick, and finally, Patrick, with his dimples, jokes and endearing face.

Oh, God, they were so cute, I thought I was going to cry.

“You’re not lost, Sadie, we’re here,” Patrick said, yanking little Sadie to her feet.

Time began to move and I saw glimpses of the boys growing into men. Mick learning how to fight and growing so frustrated he threw his sword away, but then his hand went to his heart. And his expression became one of determination.

Seamus, struggling to understand the prophecy and questioning his role in it. But then he smiled, a faint flush in his cheeks.

Patrick, quick and full of trouble, more interested in pulling pranks than training. But laying in a field of flowers and shaping a glass sun that shattered, so he sat up and tried again and again until he got it.

Finally, Michael, impatient with everyone, but the most with himself. Pushing himself to the breaking point, until he couldn’t move. His young face contorting in frustration as he stared up at the moon. Then his hand found his heart and he let out a sigh, smiling.

I saw the five of us together.

Oh.

Love poured through me, bringing tears of joy to my eyes and my heart overflowed. Laughing, I cast a hand up to the sky and the clouds vanished.

“That’s it,” I said and Skinner’s illusion broke.

“What’s it? What is happening?” Skinner barked in fear, brandishing my wand.

“You really don’t know how to use that,” I said archly, calling it back to me. “And not that I need it to stop the sad, small likes of you, Rowland Skinner, but it is mine.” With a flourish, I sent a taste of love to the gash in his chest, along with a drop of light from moon, sun and star.

“*No!”* he screamed, clawing at his chest, and horrible choking sounds emitted from him. “*I didn’t mean, no, don’t take me there… No!… What is happening to me?”*

All around him, the ground turned to a swirl of gray ether, one he struggled to escape. The connection now broken, the zombies turned on him and waded in, their grasping hands eagerly dragging him down into the depths. He’d eluded death too long.

I shuddered as he let out a wailing scream, throwing out a hand as though someone would pull him free, and then his fingers vanished.

“Now, then, to wipe away this black magic,” I murmured, flicking away the cobwebs of it and bringing Salem back to life. The town shimmered into

view. Moonlight washed over me and I raised my face to it, smiling.

“Sadie,” came an amazed, happy voice.

Michael, Mick, Patrick and Seamus were standing on a nearby roof. As I looked up at them, dawn broke across the sky and illuminated them. My heart throbbed and I caught my breath with the endless, delirious depths of love in their gazes.

Then they were leaping across the sky, running to me.

Hugging me and checking me over. Exclaiming and praising. Twisting me around so they could each sneak a kiss. Playfully tugging on my hair.

A strident bark interrupted us and I turned to see Samwise loping towards us with his signature jiggle. Belinda was behind him, her face streaked with tears, but she let out a joyous whoop when she saw me.

“Sadie. She’s okay!” Belinda yelled. “You’re okay!”

“Bells, it’s six in the morning, hush,” I scolded her as she ran up and threw her arms around me. “Oh, honey, what?” I asked, stroking her hair as she wept into my shoulder.

“We were frantic, Samwise was freaking out and trying to get outside, get to you,” Belinda shuddered. “I knew something terrible was happening and we sensed you… We all did.”

Turning, I saw Patrick had scooped Samwise up with a face of great delight and was scrunching his nose at the dog. “Aha! A Daschund familiar. I love it!”

“Ooh my,” Belinda murmured, glancing around and then giving me a knowing smile.

“*Sadie Matheson!*”

“Mother?” I asked, pulling away from Belinda.

Delia was flying towards me, with a swarm of witches, mages and even Netherfolk behind her. I saw Pem, Fawn, Oliver, Treysi, Deloise, the Bruliens, Junie, and even Nana Lou, hobbling with her cane. Almost all of the magic folk of Salem and the surrounding area where rushing towards us.

Frantic, my mother ran up to me and her hands found my face. I’d never seen her like this and it almost made me want to cry and laugh at the same time. “Are you alright? What happened? I sensed…” She shuddered and shook her head. “Oh, it was dreadful.”

“I knew it would be alright,” piped up one of the voices I loved best. Freya brushed my mother aside and smiled down at me. Imposing and

beautiful, my grandmom tossed back her white mane and embraced me. “Oh, Sadie, well done.”

“Do you know what she’s done?” Mick butted in.

“Not exactly, no,” Grandmom admitted. “All I know is Salem was in peril, about to sink into an age of darkness which would have claimed us all. And you drove it back. *Old gifted, so blessed*.”

“It’s quite a story,” said Seamus in his quiet way, but I sensed everyone pricking up their ears. He looked directly at my mother. “One in which Sadie, beautiful and brilliant Sadie, saved us all.”

“Tell me more,” Freya demanded, banging her cane on the ground.

Switching off, the guys told the small crowd everything. About the prophecy, the training and the showdown with Skinner. If I hadn’t been there, I would have thought they were exaggerating parts of it. Although I did notice Michael and Patrick taking care to really drive home how awesome I was to my mother.

Other folks had pushed forward, eager to hear what had happened and embrace me. All of them had been worried. It warmed my heart as the sun rose, filtering through the peaceful graves and lighting up the last golden leaves of the Oak towering over us.

“I cannot believe this,” my mother said when they’d finished. She looked staggered. “My daughter – Sadie, you did all that… By yourself?”

“Yes,” I said steadily. “Come now, Mother, how can that be hard to believe. I am your daughter.” She flushed and a laugh ran around the circle.

“I’m not surprised in the least,” Treysi said, beaming at me.

“Nor me!” Nana Lou said emphatically. “Came back to Salem just to see this.”

With a fluttering roll of her eyes, Delia stepped forward and embraced me. “Yes, I suppose you are your mother’s daughter.” Behind her, I saw Patrick and Mick exchange painful grimaces.

Laughing, I said, “Glad you finally realized it.”

My mother patted my head as she pulled away, but she also tugged down my shirt and pinched my muffin top. I rolled my eyes. *Some things never change.* Yet at the same time, I sensed something had. I could have a relationship with Delia on my own terms now.

She no longer had any power over me, I was my own woman.

A woman who had Michael giving Delia dagger eyes, Patrick whispering jokes to Seamus, and Mick folding his arms.

Ahem. They all looked at me and their faces relaxed into smiles.

I had incredible powers and gifts, yes, but more importantly I had them, four handsome, brave men who loved me for me.

EPILOGUE

Two weeks later

SOMETHING WAS TICKLING my palm and I tried to pull back or swat it away, but it grew more insistent. The sensation increased and began on my other palm, then my neck and navel.

Cracking an eye open, I met Michael's blue gaze, then Mick's green one. Mick pretended to bite a finger, while Michael's tongue flicked out along the love line of my palm. I shivered, realizing what was happening. They'd been dropping hints and whispering promises.

Now they were all in bed with me.

And I was completely naked.

"See, good things come to those who wait," Mick said.

It wasn't the first time we'd all been in bed together, but our clothes had stayed on those previous times. The day after Skinner's defeat, I'd awakened to find myself entangled in a heap of O'Sullivans, their strong bodies keeping me warm and safe. Then they began to stroke and kiss my body, yet focused only on comfort and healing.

When I'd begged for more, they'd said I needed time to recover. Patrick had been about to give in, but Michael put his foot down.

"I'm the last one to talk about patience, but I know we need it right now."

Over the past two weeks, as I'd recuperated, we'd put my life back together in the blink of an eye. Over a week ago, the shop had re-opened

and it had been doing a booming business. So much so, the old Sadie would have been worried it was too good to be true.

I, however, took it in stride, enjoying bossing the boys around my shop and cooking up new merchandise with Patrick and Seamus in the back.

As full as my heart was of love, though, I was so desperate for release, last night I'd thought I'd have to corner one of them to give it to me. And now they were all here.

Michael's lips were on my wrist now, the sensitive skin brushed by his stubble. Mick was kissing each fingertip of the other hand. Patrick was draped over my legs, lavishing kisses on my belly button. Toes and fingers curling, I whimpered as Seamus kissed his way down my neck to nip my collarbone.

"We know you've been patient," Michael said, his lips now at my elbow. "And in need of us."

"As much as we needed you," Mick added.

"But is this okay, Sadie, do you want – are you ready for this?" Seamus asked, raising his head. "I hope you know what this means."

I nodded, remembering the feeling of sensing their love, their hearts and their beautiful souls surrounding mine. "Yes," I whispered. "I love you all so much."

Seamus kissed me, surprising me with his boldness and I smiled at him as he pulled away. "We know. And we all love you."

"So much," Michael murmured, kissing my shoulder now.

"If that's the case," I said, trying to sit up and failing. "Why are you all *dressed*?"

Laughter rumbled around the room as I managed to sit up this time and yank off Mick's shirt, as he tugged off his boxers. I realized I'd yet to see him naked and took in his broad chest, sweeping my eyes down to that glorious cock.

They were arranged around me. Michael had risen up on his knees, his arms folded and he stared down at me with that infuriating, delicious smirk. Patrick, lounging by my feet and promising all sorts of wild and naughty things with just a glance. Seamus, gray-eyed and intense, but with a touch of a smile as our thoughts brushed together, light as feathers. And Mick, reliable and huge, always at my side.

But the sight of those four naked men in my bed, their attention on me and only me, had my core shaking so hard with anticipation and desire, I

almost came right there. All I saw were miles of chiseled abs, sturdy shoulders and stiffening cocks.

“Damn, I love you guys.”

It was like the starting shot at a race as they all converged on me.

Michael was first, his patience cracking as his lips captured mine. His hands speared into my hair, pulling hard to angle my head for better access. His tongue stroked inside and I reached down to fist his cock to remind him two could play at this game.

Or maybe three, as I also reached for Mick, who was nibbling my neck. My fingers could barely wrap around the girth of him and his groans rumbled against my throat.

Meanwhile, I felt Patrick and Seamus climb up, maneuvering in to latch on to my breasts. Patrick tugged and nipped at the right one, the nipple going hard instantly. Seamus took his time, licking and flicking with the tip of his tongue.

Moaning into Michael’s mouth, I rubbed my legs together, trying to find release from all the friction in the air. Never mind the scrape of body hair against my skin, the edges of hard muscles pushing me down into the mattress and the sounds we were making.

It was so erotic, I almost wanted to pause and listen to it.

Patrick’s devilish fingers were suddenly drawing loops on my outer folds and I bucked against his hand. In return, he pressed a thumb into my clit, circling that button one way and then the other. Michael was still capturing every moan, even as he groaned into my mouth.

Seamus’s hand had taken over for Patrick on my breast, I realized. Fingers curled inside of me. Arching up, I cried out and Michael broke away.

“Get her up on her knees,” Mick said and Patrick’s hand vanished for a moment as I was pulled upright. There was some shuffling and then Mick was sucking on a breast next to Seamus while Patrick’s fingers slipped back inside.

Meanwhile, as though to keep me guessing, Michael had settled behind me, his cock pressing into my ass, but his hands kneading my shoulders and lips on my neck. Reaching up, I held on to his hair, arching forward as Patrick began to work me harder with his fingers.

“Oh, god yes, like that,” I said, reveling in all the hands and mouths all over me. “I’m close–”

But I wasn’t close. I was gone. Sagging backward into Michael, he held me as the orgasm shook through me, making me cry out and tremble. They held me through it, sucking and licking and sliding, and when it was over, they flipped me around. My hips were in the air and Michael’s molten mouth was devouring me. Blood rushed to my head as my sensitive core took on another assault.

Seamus started kissing me upside down, tangling his tongue with mine in ways that had me spinning off into the stratosphere. Meanwhile, I felt Mick cupping my breasts in both hands, groaning in satisfaction as I cried out when he flicked a rough thumb against them.

As for Patrick, his adventurous mouth was kissing along my lower back. Then he bit my ass and I spasmed. Michael slowed, causing me to writhe and cry out against Seamus, but it was to no avail. Patrick and Michael both began to drive me equally crazy. Patrick was nibbling along my ass, flicking his tongue near that button, but never on it, while Michael was nipping at my clit.

For a moment, they stopped and then both of them started at once. Tongues laved both of my holes without mercy. Gasping, Seamus and I broke apart as I mewled helplessly. I could sense him watching me and reaching up to pleasure him. Then his cock was in my mouth and I took him eagerly, trying to dole out some of the blissful torture being enacted on me.

As I was tongue-fucked to the point of insanity, I worked Seamus faster and faster, driven to watch his face as it grew tense and then suddenly went slack as he came in a hot rush.

Before I could even blink, I was kneeling over Mick’s lap and his cock was demanding entrance. Nodding, I was surprised when he took his time, teasing the wide head of his cock back and forth across my folds. Moaning, I grabbed his shoulders, when someone else pulled my hands overhead.

Michael.

His cock slid into my ass as Mick slid into my center. In almost perfect tandem, they’d entered me and had me screaming out their names. When both of them had filled me to the breaking point, Seamus and Patrick moved in, each of them showering kisses up and down my sides. Their fingers followed, pinching and rubbing.

Hips were slamming against mine from front and back. Mouths were all over me. Hands were all over me. Skin met skin. Lips met lips.

It was cataclysmic. Filled by massive cocks, working in tandem to bring me to pleasure.

Stretching, filling and pushing me in ways I never thought I could be.

As with everything else, the O'Sullivans opened my eyes to things I never knew I wanted.

And then I shattered, squeezing and spasming on two engorged cocks. Both men stiffened a moment later and their shouts of pleasure followed.

For a while, after that, we lay in an exhausted pile. I may have even fallen asleep.

The next thing I knew, I was in the shower, being treated to a four-man scrub down. There, I was fucked against the wall by Patrick while the others watched or leaned in to kiss me.

Then I sank to my knees and switched off between Michael and Seamus. After, Mick took my ass while Seamus slid into my core. At the end of that, even they were exhausted and traipsed off to bed. My bed, I might add.

"Our bed," Michael said, glancing over with a yawn.

It was funny how our connection worked so intermittently. While Seamus and I could talk telepathically with concentration, it was random with the other three.

Love filled me as I watched them settle into the bed, leaving a space for me.

Life was a dream. I imagined Oralee would be delighted that was the case. However, I also hoped there were no more prophecies by that sly ancestor. My eyes flicked to the *Libris Ides* on the side table. I hadn't told the guys about meeting her yet. I wasn't sure why.

All I knew is that I wanted this peace to last forever.

Climbing into bed, something moved out of the corner of my eye and I glanced at the book. It had fallen open and the pages were ruffling. It stopped on a page with swirls of silver and gold, and a faint thread of music whispered through the air…

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Four very bad boys, one ill-advised Christmas wish...what's a girl to do?

Eleanor Maxwell loves her job at the daycare center and can’t wait to become a full-fledged teacher. But when a sexy stranger propositions her, she can’t help but wonder if she’s played it too safe all these years. Just when she’s considering throwing caution to the wind for a night of passion, the matter is taken out of her hands as she’s swept away by a clan of dragon shifters claiming they need a mate…and she’s it!

CHAPTER One

"IT'S LOVELY," I said, holding up Bobby White's drawing and squinting. "What is it?”

"You!" squealed Bobby, with perhaps just a hint a of reproach in his young voice.

I looked again at the confusion of blue and red paint, sprinkled with glitter and, for some reason, with a dead leaf pasted into the middle of it. "Of course it's me! How silly of me not to recognize myself."

"You ridin' a dom-key," Bobby explained.

"What fun," I said with an enthusiastic nod.

"In a spaceship. With a crocodile." He pointed to a bright orange smear and I beamed back at him.

I never got tired of listening to the flights of imagination of my two and three-year old charges. They might not have always had the language skills to express what they meant--to Bobby, every animal between the sizes of a dog and horse was a crocodile--but their enthusiasm for everything, their curiosity about the world, and their desire to see everything, do everything, and learn everything at ninety miles a minute made them the best people in the world to work with, bar none.

The kids were why I got into teaching in the first place - or at least they were why I was *trying* to get into teaching. Working at the Sunshine Daycare Center was a day job, a way to pay the bills while I got my Masters in teaching via night school. It made for a punishing schedule, but I stuck with it because being a teacher was all I had ever wanted, and because working with the kids was its own reward. Of course the money was important too. A Masters is an expensive commitment - just meeting living

expenses was tough enough, even if you're not living in the big city. The money I earned didn't have time to get comfortable in my bank account - it went straight in and straight out again.

"It's beautiful," I said to Bobby. "I'm going to put it up on the wall."

"Fank you Elmelemanor!" My name--which was more usually pronounced Eleanor, or just plain Ella--was always a bridge too far for Bobby's diction.

He scooted off happily, back to the drawing table to work on his next masterpiece, while I surveyed the room. The brilliant thing about kids at this age was that they had no concept of 'cool'. Even before the word was used in human history there was a sort of unconscious concept of 'cool' - some cavemen would look down on others because they wore the wrong type of animal skin, while others self-consciously hid their interest in quartz because everyone else was into flint. For some reason, this is how we're wired.

But not kids.

Kids do what they want without ever worrying about how it might look. They dance if they want to dance for sheer joy of doing it and don't care that they look like a puppet with its strings cut, on speed. They tell each other, their parents, their teachers and even random strangers that they love them. They wear what they like, they say what they think and they never worry that anyone might judge them for it. Best of all, none of their peers *do* judge them for it. When they dance badly, no one makes fun - they're more likely to join in. Sometimes you'll see kids behaving like kids in the park and parents will desperately try to rein them in - my heart breaks a little every time I see something like that. This stage of their lives, this joyous, non-judgmental attitude, is all too short. In a scant ten years it will be gone and they'll be picking on the weaker ones in the herd because they're wearing the wrong sneakers or listening to the wrong music.

I often wondered how much we accidentally inflicted those prejudices on children from our own experience. Or perhaps it was just an inevitable part of growing up; finding your people, your tribe, your clan. Either way, the more time I spent with children of this extraordinary age, the more I thought we could all learn a thing or two from them. I didn't have to look back very far through my own life to think of opportunities missed because I was too scared to go after what I had really wanted. I know it's a horrible trite to say - I'm supposed to be teaching them but I feel like they're the ones

who are teaching me' - but that's genuinely how I felt. To live without the societal inhibitions of adulthood, that would be something.

"Ella!"

Just as I was thinking these very deep thoughts, Janet, one of the other caregivers, yelled to me and pointed at where Tyler Montgomery was painting a mural on the wall of the naptime room with the contents of his diaper.

"I got him," I called back to Janet. "Tyler! What are you doing? You wouldn't do that at home would you?"

As I chased after the half-naked Tyler, who had made a break for it as fast as his pudgy little legs would carry him, I reflected that Tyler's mother was in fact a conceptual artist, who had apparently won a major award last year for a pile of distressed tires which she set on fire outside the Rockefeller Center. I had asked what it meant but she said 'Whatever you want it to mean', which didn't really help. For all I knew, she was training Tyler up for her next exhibition. I made a mental note to ask her to tell Tyler that feces were not an appropriate medium.

After a surprisingly vigorous chase around the soft play area--the kid had an impressive turn of speed--I managed to grab Tyler, who acquiesced immediately with a big grin on his face.

"Come on." I took Tyler to the changing table to clean him up and get him into a clean diaper, while Janet made a start on the wall. I'm wasn't sure which of us had drawn the short straw there, but tomorrow the roles might be reversed. You couldn’t work with kids without taking the rough with the smooth, or without developing a pretty high tolerance for poop over every surface. Of course, there was a downside to just doing what you wanted at every opportunity. But still, it looked like a pretty good way to live your life. Provided there was someone else to wipe the poop off the walls afterwards.

By the time I had managed to manhandle the squirmy Tyler into a fresh diaper, located the rest of his clothes and persuaded him back into them, it was close to quitting time. Parents were starting to show up to claim children who begged for 'Five more minutes!' to finish whatever made-up game they had embarked upon. Janet and I, along with the other two caregivers, Ruth and Valentina, helped bundle kids into hats, scarves and boots to protect them from the wintery chill without. Lost mittens were

tracked down, sweaters stretched over tiny heads, and toys pointedly taken and put to one side for 'just long enough to get your coat on'.

Much as I enjoyed my work, I was happy enough to see them go, it had been a long day, with the troublesome Tyler setting the seal on it. As more parents turned up, I tried to make myself a little more presentable following my cross-country assault course on the tail of the budding conceptual artist. There again was that very human need to look the part in the presence of others. All these people had children. They all knew that looking presentable and handling kids did not go hand in hand, and yet I still felt the need to force my auburn hair back into the bun from which it had escaped.

I was still glowing--men sweat - women glow--so much that my blouse was sticking to my back, but there wasn't much I could do about that, or about my still red face. I really needed to get a bit more exercise - when a three-year old can out-run you and get you out of breath, then it's time to dig out that long-forgotten gym membership. But not tonight. It was Friday night, which meant that there was no school for me this evening and that the pile of studying on my desk could wait until the weekend.

The first order of tonight was a long, relaxing bath with a tall, relaxing glass of wine, closely followed by an evening in front of the TV with friends and more wine. When I was younger that would have sounded like a pretty tame Friday night, but at the grand old age of twenty-four it was about as wild as a night gets. I was looking forward to the Christmas break, when I might unleash what was left of my wild side for long enough to actually go out to a bar.

"Doing anything this weekend?" asked Janet, as we watched over the leaving children, exchanging smiles and encouraging words with parents as they came and went.

"Studying," I admitted.

"You work too hard."

"That degree isn't going to master itself."

"Yeah but doing it alongside this?" Janet indicated the quietening chaos of the room.

"Well, if I want to eat, I have to work."

Janet rolled her eyes. "I am aware of this. I'm just saying, there may be jobs which are better paid and less exhausting, which might be more suited to someone doing a degree on the side."

Of course, she was right. I thought about telling her that doing a job in the childcare industry was an important part of my training and would count in my favor in the future - which was kind of true. But that wasn't the real reason I worked here. I loved working with kids. Perhaps that was a dumb reason to exhaust myself daily, but there it was.

"Thanks for the advice, but I'm happy with things the way they are."

Janet shook her head. "You're nuts, girl. I can't think of one good reason to work in a place like--" she broke off and let out a low whistle as her cheeks went pink. "Well, hello good reason."

Janet's gaze had drifted away from my face and towards the door behind me, through which parents were still arriving and departing. I turned to see what she was looking at, and what Ruth and Valentina had now joined her in looking at.

The man seemed to fill the room. Not just because he was tall, although he was; not just because his chunky sweater struggled to contain his broad chest--how could muscles be outlined in wool?-- but because he carried with him an indefinable aura, a charisma that extended around him. Any room into which he walked, he would automatically be the center. It helped that he was perhaps the most handsome man I had seen - and based on the slack jawed looks of the other girls, it was not just me.

His hair was black and I looked for dark eyes to match, but instead my gaze was met by a pair of piercing green ones, almost cat-like in their intensity. As they lighted on me I felt my knees wobble, and surreptitiously steadied myself against a desk.

For a moment, it felt as if all four women were in the starting blocks for the one hundred meter sprint. Janet was married, Ruth had a boyfriend and Valentina had an 'understanding' with the man who delivered the kids' lunches every day, and yet this still seemed like a four-way race, and they would explain things to their partners at a later date. Fortunately for me, the man spoke before any of us could move.

"Is one of you ladies Miss Maxwell? Eleanor Maxwell?"

I was sure I had actually heard Janet whimper quietly when the man started speak, in a voice that sounded as if it had been coated in dark chocolate. When he said my name, something happened inside me that didn't usually happen without inappropriate touching.

"That's me!" My enthusiasm probably sounded a little over the top but I was rewarded with the man's face breaking into smile that made his

chiseled good looks even closer to sublime perfection. I could feel the quiet jealousy of the other three women burning holes in me as I strolled, as casually as I was currently able, towards the tall, dark stranger, feeling almost as if I was drawn by his eyes.

"I'm Eleanor Maxwell. Ella. Call me Ella. What can I do to you? For you!" I blushed deep scarlet--no one can blush like a pale-skinned girl.

"You were recommended to me. By Mrs. Miller," he added, just as I had started wondering what I might have been recommended for. "I want to offer you a job."

Daisy Miller was a lovely child, one of the sweetest you could ask to meet, but she was also very shy, with an unfortunate habit of wetting herself around strangers. I had taken the girl on as my personal project and got her over this issue - it was nice to know that it had been appreciated.

"She says you're great with kids," the man continued.

"Kids. Yes," I said, with less articulacy than many of the Sunshine kids could manage. I tried to ignore the not very subtle giggling and whispering coming from behind me and made an effort to be more professional. "I'd definitely be interested." As long as I was still working with kids then I could cut back my hours at the center, assuming this would be better paid. "Would you like to come back to the office and discuss it?" As I finished, I allowed my eyes to do a surreptitious sweep of his hand - no wedding ring. Not that that mattered of course since this was all business, but still good to know.

The man looked about him. "Looks like you're closing up for the evening and I don't want to rush through the details. There's a bar down the street, how about we discuss this over a drink?"

However much my libido was calling the shots at this point, I was not stupid. I realized that going to bar with a strange man was not a sensible thing to do. He could have been a serial killer. On the other hand, he had asked me in front of three giggling witnesses, the bar he was talking about was always busy, and he was *very* handsome. It had also been a long time since I'd been for a drink with a man, and even longer since I'd done any of things that having a drink with a man was supposed to lead to. I was in the middle of a dry spell that made the Sahara look like Sea World, and I was standing here with the most attractive man I'd ever laid eyes on who might just be willing to end it. My mind was no longer dwelling on what was the worst that could happen, and moved onto what might be the best. And from

the looks of him, it would be The Best. For a moment, my thoughts took an incongruous turn back to earlier in the day; if you want something then go for it. Live like a kid for once.

"That sounds great."

The man smiled, which was in itself enough to convince me that I'd made the right decision. Besides, I *do* need the money; my fridge is on the fritz.

As I headed out with a man whose name I did not even know, I glanced back at Janet and saw her biting her knuckle, making me laugh. I wondered if Mr. Tall, Dark and Green-Eyed would be open to mixing business with pleasure. A girl could dream.

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